

ANATOMY OF THE INVISIBLE: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF *SUKSHMA SHARIR* AND ITS BOUNDARIES

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ABSTRACT

The Ayurvedic understanding of *Sharira* extends beyond the description of gross anatomical structures. Classical Ayurvedic literature describes the human body through multiple structural, functional, and conceptual categories, some of which can be demonstrated through direct anatomical observation, whereas others operate at levels that cannot be represented as discrete gross anatomical structures. The concept of *Sukshma Sharira* therefore represents an important yet complex area for contemporary interpretation within *Rachna Sharira*. The present study aimed to critically review the concept of *Sukshma Sharira* and its conceptual boundaries. A narrative literary review was undertaken using classical Ayurvedic texts, including *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, and *Ashtanga Hridaya*, along with relevant philosophical literature, commentarial material, and contemporary academic publications. The reviewed concepts were analysed according to their structural, structural-functional, and subtle or conceptual characteristics, with particular attention to distinguishing classical texts. The review indicates that classical literature presents the human body through multiple levels of organization. Certain entities such as *Asthi*, *Sandhi*, and several anatomical structures possess relatively demonstrable gross anatomical counterparts, whereas concepts such as *Srotas* and *Marma* represent broader structural-functional relationships that may not correspond to a single discrete anatomical structure. The concept of *Sukshma Sharira*, particularly in association with *Linga Sharira*, has a more explicit and systematic formulation in *Sankhya* philosophical literature and should not be

automatically considered a conventional gross anatomical category of the Ayurvedic *Samhitas*. It is therefore concluded that *Sukshma Sharira* should not be forcibly equated with a specific modern anatomical organ, tissue, or system in the absence of direct textual or empirical evidence. A clear distinction between classical textual description, conceptual interpretation, proposed anatomical correlation, and experimentally demonstrated anatomical fact is essential for scientifically responsible research in *Rachna Sharira*.

Keywords: *Sukshma Sharira, Linga Sharira, Rachna Sharira, Sthula Sharira, Ayurveda, Anatomy, Subtle Body, Anatomical Correlation.*

INTRODUCTION

Anatomy is fundamentally concerned with the structural organization of the human body. Modern anatomical science studies bodily structures through direct observation, dissection, microscopy, radiological imaging, and increasingly sophisticated three-dimensional visualization techniques. The Ayurvedic discipline of *Rachna Sharira*, however, approaches the human body through a broader conceptual framework in which structure is frequently described in relation to development, function, constitution, and consciousness.

The classical *Samhitas* contain extensive descriptions of bodily structures and their organization. *Sushruta* is particularly well known for his systematic discussion of *Sharira* and for emphasizing anatomical knowledge in relation to surgical practice. Historical scholarship has also recognized the importance of *Sushruta Samhita* in the development of anatomical knowledge in ancient India.^[1]

At the same time, Ayurvedic literature cannot be interpreted simply as an ancient version of modern gross anatomy. Classical anatomical terminology may represent a physical structure, a functional system, a structural-functional relationship, or a broader conceptual category. This distinction becomes particularly important when discussing subtle dimensions of embodiment.

Charaka describes *Sharira* as:

“तत्र शरीरं नाम चेतनाधिष्ठानभूतं पञ्चमहाभूतविकारसमुदायात्मकं समयोगवाहि।”^[2]

The expression “Chetanadhishtanabhutam” indicates that the body is considered in relation to consciousness, while “Panchamahabhuta-*Vikara*-samudayatmakam” describes it as a composite arising from transformations of the five *Mahabhutas*.^[2]

Thus, the Ayurvedic description of *Sharira* does not merely constitute a list of gross structures. Rather, it presents the body within a wider structural and functional framework.

A similar multidimensional perspective can be observed in *Sushruta*'s description of embryonic development:

“शुक्रशोणितं गर्भाशयस्थमात्मप्रकृतिविकारसम्पूर्चितं ‘गर्भ’ इत्युच्यते।”^[3]

Sushruta subsequently describes the progressive development of the embryo and the appearance of recognizable anatomical components:

“...हस्तपादजिह्वाघ्राणकर्णनितम्बादिभिरङ्गैरुपेतस्तदा ‘शरीरं’ इति सञ्ज्ञां लभते।”^[3]

These descriptions demonstrate that classical *Sharira* literature incorporates both developmental processes and manifest anatomical structures.

The present review focuses on a particularly challenging question: what lies at the conceptual boundary between gross anatomy and the subtle dimensions of embodiment? The expression *Sukshma Sharira* is frequently used in modern discussions of Ayurveda and Indian philosophy. However, methodological caution is required because the term does not function as a single, universally identical anatomical category across all classical traditions. Its systematic formulation as *Sukshma* or *Linga Sharira* is especially prominent in *Sankhya* philosophy.^[4]

Therefore, the present article does not attempt to prove that *Sukshma Sharira* represents a hidden modern anatomical organ. Instead, it critically examines how the concept may be understood and where the limits of anatomical correlation should be placed.

AIM

To critically review the concept of *Sukshma Sharira* and examine its conceptual boundaries with gross anatomical understanding from the perspective of *Rachna Sharira*.

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the concept of *Sharira* in classical Ayurvedic literature.
2. To review the distinction between gross and subtle dimensions of embodiment.
3. To analyse the textual position of *Sukshma* or *Linga Sharira* in classical Indian thought.
4. To examine selected Ayurvedic concepts that lie at the interface of structure and function.
5. To critically assess attempts to establish one-to-one correspondence between subtle concepts and modern anatomical structures.
6. To propose an evidence-based framework for contemporary *Rachna Sharira* research concerning subtle anatomical concepts.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present work is designed as a narrative literary and conceptual review of the classical and contemporary understanding of *Sukshma Sharira* and its conceptual boundaries with gross anatomical structures. The primary classical sources consulted for the review include the *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, and *Ashtanga Hridaya*. Relevant philosophical literature, particularly the *Sankhya* tradition and its descriptions of *Sukshma Sharira* or *Linga Sharira*, was also examined to understand the philosophical basis and conceptual dimensions of subtle bodily entities. In addition, selected contemporary scholarly publications dealing with the history, interpretation, and development of Ayurvedic anatomical concepts were reviewed to contextualize the classical descriptions within the framework of modern anatomical scholarship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Sharir in Ayurveda

The Ayurvedic understanding of *Sharira* is multidimensional. *Charaka's* description of the body as “*Chetanadhishtanabhuta*” emphasizes its association with consciousness, while

simultaneously describing it as a composite of the five *Mahabhutas*.^[2] *Charaka* also describes the relationship between the constituent principles of the individual and the broader cosmic framework:

“षड्धातवः समुदिताः ‘लोक’ इति शब्दं लभन्ते...

एत एव च षड्धातवः समुदिताः ‘पुरुष’ इति शब्दं लभन्ते।”^[5]

This description indicates that the Ayurvedic concept of the individual is not restricted to the gross body alone. *Sushruta*'s embryological account similarly integrates material and non-material conceptual categories during development. The embryo is described in relation to *Shukra*, *Shonita*, *Atman*, *Prakriti*, and *Vikara* before the progressive appearance of recognizable body parts.^[3] Therefore, the Ayurvedic concept of *Sharira* can be understood as a layered model of embodiment rather than merely an anatomical inventory.

***Sthula* and *Sukshma*; Conceptual distinction**

The terms *Sthula* and *Sukshma* should not be interpreted merely as “visible” and “invisible.” *Sthula* generally indicates the gross or manifest dimension, whereas *Sukshma* indicates subtlety, minuteness, or a level that is not directly accessible through ordinary sensory examination. A conceptual comparison may be represented as follows:

Feature	<i>Sthula</i> Dimension	<i>Sukshma</i> Dimension
General nature	Gross/manifest	Subtle
Direct observation	Relatively possible	Not established through ordinary dissection
Imaging	May be demonstrated	No established direct equivalent as such
Anatomical localization	Often possible	Not necessarily applicable
Interpretation	Primarily structural	Conceptual/functional/philosophical

One-to-one modern equivalent	Sometimes possible	Cannot be assumed
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This distinction is important because a subtle concept should not automatically be converted into a modern anatomical structure merely because both are associated with similar functions.

Sukshma Sharir in Ayurveda

A significant textual foundation for the concept of subtle body is found in *Sankhya* philosophy. *Sankhya Karika* states

“सूक्ष्मा मातापितृजाः सह प्रभूतैस्त्रिधा विशेषाः स्युः ।

सूक्ष्मास्तेषां नियता मातापितृजा निवर्तन्ते ॥” [4]

The following *Karika* describes the *Linga*:

“पूर्वोत्पन्नमसक्तं नियतं महदादिसूक्ष्मपर्यन्तम् ।

संसरति निरुपभोगं भावैरधिवासितं लिङ्गम् ॥” [4]

These verses are important because they demonstrate that *Sukshma* or *Linga Sharira* has a specific philosophical context involving subtle principles and transmigration. Consequently, when the concept is incorporated into a *Rachna Sharira* discussion, its philosophical origin and terminology should be explicitly acknowledged. This prevents the common error of presenting *Sukshma Sharira* as though it were simply another gross anatomical structure described by *Sushruta*.

The boundary between Gross and Subtle Anatomy

The boundary between gross and subtle concepts can be understood through selected Ayurvedic examples.

Srotas - *Srotas* are described as channels through which substances or processes move within the organism. A simplistic approach may attempt to assign each *Srotas* to one modern anatomical tube or vessel. However, the classical concept often encompasses a combination of structure, pathway, and function. Therefore, *Srotas* may demonstrate a structural-functional level of Ayurvedic organization rather than a universal one-to-one anatomical equivalent.

Marma - *Marma* represents an anatomically localized region with major consequences when injured. Its description incorporates anatomical position together with functional and prognostic significance. Thus, *Marma* can be interpreted as a regional anatomical vulnerability concept rather than being reduced to a single nerve, vessel, or organ.

Indriya - The concept of *Indriya* further illustrates the distinction between structure and function. A sensory organ can be identified anatomically, but perception involves a complex interaction between sensory structures, neural processing, and consciousness. Consequently, a sensory organ cannot be considered equivalent to the complete conceptual meaning of *Indriya*. The classical concept operates at a broader functional level.

DISCUSSION

One of the major challenges in contemporary Ayurvedic research is the tendency to search for a modern anatomical equivalent for every classical term. This approach may be useful when the classical description contains sufficient anatomical information. However, it becomes problematic when the classical concept has a wider philosophical or functional meaning. For example, it would not be methodologically appropriate to state that: *Sukshma Sharira* = brain Or *Sukshma Sharira* = nervous system without direct evidence establishing such an identity. The brain is a demonstrable anatomical organ with defined morphology, histology, and neurophysiology. *Sukshma* or *Linga Sharira* belongs to a conceptual framework involving subtle principles and continuity of embodiment.^[4] Therefore, similarity of function or conceptual association cannot by itself establish anatomical equivalence. The same principle applies when attempting to correlate Chetana, Prana, or other subtle concepts with isolated modern anatomical structures.

CONCLUSION

The concept of *Sukshma Sharira* occupies an important conceptual boundary between gross anatomy, functional organization, and philosophical understanding of embodiment. Classical Ayurvedic literature describes *Sharira* through multiple dimensions. *Charaka* describes the body as “*Chetanadhishtanabhuta*,” while *Sushruta* integrates material and developmental principles in his description of embryonic formation.^[2,3] The explicit terminology of *Sukshma* or *Linga Sharira* is particularly systematized within *Sankhya* philosophy.^[4] Accordingly, *Sukshma Sharira* should not be forcibly equated with the brain, nervous system, endocrine system, or any other single modern anatomical structure. A scientifically responsible approach requires a distinction between:

Classical textual description → Conceptual interpretation → Anatomical correlation → Experimentally demonstrated fact

The study of the “anatomy of the invisible” therefore need not be an attempt to locate a hidden organ. Instead, it provides an opportunity to understand how classical Indian knowledge systems conceptualized the human organism across different levels of structure, function, and embodiment. Such an approach can contribute to the development of a more critically grounded and methodologically rigorous framework for contemporary *Rachna Sharira* research.

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