

Nidra as a Pillar of Health : A Brihatrayi perspective

Dr. Nippu Kumari Sharma¹, Dr. Purva Joshi², Dr. Indu Singh³, Dr. Mainak Biswas⁴, Dr. Satender Kumar Mishra⁵

¹.Assistant professor, Department of Ayurved Samhita and Siddhant, Dr. Prakash chandra Ayurvedic medical college and hospital, Patna, Bihar

².Post graduate scholar, Department of Ayurved Samhita and Siddhant , Institute of Post Graduate Ayurvedic Education & Research At SVSP hospital, Kolkata, W.B

³.Post graduate scholar, Department of Dravyaguna Vigyana, Institute of Post Graduate Ayurvedic Education & Research At SVSP hospital, Kolkata, W.B

⁴Post graduate scholar, Department of Kayachikitsa, Institute of Post Graduate Ayurvedic Education & Research At SVSP hospital, Kolkata, W.B

⁵.H.O.D and Professor, Department of Ayurved Samhita and Siddhant ,Dr. Prakash chandra Ayurvedic medical college and hospital, Patna, Bihar

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ABSTRACT

Nidra (Sleep) is recognized as one of the three fundamental pillars of life (Trayopstambha) in Ayurveda and is extensively discussed in the classical brihatrayee texts. These texts describe Nidra not merely as rest but as an active physiological process essential for maintaining the balance of doshas, nourishing the dhatus and supporting mental and physical well being. This review article aims to explore the multifaceted concept of Nidra based on all three texts of Brihatrayee. It presents a comparative and analytical study of definitions, classifications, functions, causes of Nidranasha and clinical consequences of sleep disturbances. This review underscores the profound philosophical, physiological and clinical significance of Nidra. By integrating the classical Ayurvedic view with modern sleep science, this review underscores the timeless relevance of Nidra in maintaining physiological harmony and psychological well-being. The wisdom of the Brihatrayee not only anticipates current clinical concerns but also offers practical and individualized solutions rooted in nature and behavior. This article aims to re-establish the central role of Nidra in Ayurvedic clinical practice and promote further research in its application to contemporary sleep disorders.

Keywords: Nidra, sleep, Trayopstambha, Ahara, Brahmacharya, Chetana.

INTRODUCTION

Hypertension is an epidemic that affects around 1 billion people across the world and is the commonest risk factor for mortality. As per the world health statistics, the prevalence of hypertension is 29.2% and 24.8% in males and females respectively and out of total mortalities that occurred in 2004, 12.8% were because of hypertension. (1) Although there is no direct reference of hypertension to a single unanimously accepted disease entity in Ayurveda, this illness is often seen along the lines of several diseases described in Ayurvedic texts such as Raktagata vata, Siragata vata, and Dhamani pratichaya, etc. The National Health Portal of India, hosted by Govt. of India has used the term Vyana-bala-vaishamya to refer to hypertension (2). Vyana Vayu is seated in the heart and circulates all over the body (3). Vyana Bala can be inferred as the normal function of Vyana Vayu. Vaishamya can be seen as a state of functional abnormality. Therefore, Vyana-bala vaishamya can be defined as the abnormal function of Vyana Vayu that manifests in the form of a disease that shares the pathophysiology of hypertension.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Ayurveda, the ancient Indian science of life, emphasizes a holistic approach to health, rooted in the balance of bodily humors (doshas), proper nutrition (ahara), and lifestyle practices (vihara). Among the foundational concepts that govern health and well-being is the principle of Trayopastambha—three essential pillars that sustain

life: Ahara (diet), Nidra (sleep), and Brahmacharya (regulated conduct).(1) Of these, Nidra is regarded as critical for mental and physical rejuvenation, with wide-reaching implications for immunity, cognition, strength, and longevity. In the Charaka Samhita, Nidra is described as a svabhavika kriya (natural physiological activity) and an essential component of daily life.(2) This suggests that the onset of sleep occurs naturally due to the withdrawal of sensory and motor functions and predominance of Tamas in the mind. Proper sleep promotes happiness, sorrow (in its absence), strength, nourishment, knowledge, and even life itself.(3) Sushruta samhita emphasizes the pivotal role of sleep in determining pleasure and pain, nourishment and emaciation, strength and debility, fertility and impotence, and even knowledge and ignorance.(4) Such holistic insights reflect Ayurveda's deep understanding of the psychosomatic interplay governed by nidra. In the Ashtanga Hridaya, Vagbhata explains that sleep arises when the mind and senses become fatigued and withdraw inward due to the dominance of Tamas and Kapha.(5) This offers a psychophysiological explanation of sleep, aligning well with modern neuroscience concepts of sensory withdrawal and circadian fatigue. All three treatises clearly articulate the necessity of proper sleep for health maintenance, and the consequences of both Anidra (insomnia) and Atinidra (hypersomnia), including Agni-mandya, cognitive deficits, fatigue, and psychological distress. In the modern era, where disrupted circadian rhythms and psychosomatic stress are widespread, revisiting and revalidating these classical Ayurvedic perspectives on Nidra is both timely and essential. This review aims to critically analyze the concept of Nidra as presented in the Brihatrayee, bridging classical knowledge with current relevance in Ayurvedic practice

Aims and Objectives:

To explore the classical definitions, mechanisms, and functions of Nidra as mentioned in the Brihatrayee.

To analyze and compare the types of Nidra according to Charaka, Sushruta, and Vagbhata.

To discuss the similarities and differences between Ayurvedic and modern views on sleep and its regulation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This review is based on a detailed study of the classical Ayurvedic texts of the *Brihatrayee*—*Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, and *Ashtanga Hridaya*.

Standard Sanskrit commentaries were referred to for deeper understanding.

Concepts related to *Nidra* were systematically compiled and categorized into definitions, types, causative factors, physiological significance, and management.

Results and Discussion

Definition of Nidra

According to *Acharya Charak*, when the mind becomes fatigued and the sense organs withdraw from their activities, and the intellect ceases to function normally, that state is called sleep (*Nidra*) in human beings.⁽⁶⁾ This definition emphasizes the withdrawal of mental and sensory activity as the fundamental cause of sleep.

Acharya Sushruta states that sleep occurs when *Tamas* covers the *Hridaya*, which is the seat of *Chetana*.⁽⁷⁾

Swabhaviki Nidra

Sleep manifests naturally in person with predominance of *Tamo-Guna* both during day and night; in those with predominance of *Rajoguna* it occurs without any reason at any time; in persons with predominance of *Satwaguna*, it occurs at midnights which is *Swabhaviki Nidra*.

Vaikariki Nidra

In persons in whom *Sleshma (Kapha)* has decreased and *Anila (Vata)* has increased, and in those whose mind and body are in trouble by disease etc., it (sleep) does not appear at all, any time; this is *Vaikariki* (abnormal)

Types of Nidra

Acharya Charaka has classified *Nidra* in following manner according to causes⁽⁸⁾

Tamobhava - caused by *tama*

Shleshma samudbhava - caused by vitiated *Kapha*

Mana-Sharirshrama saambhava - caused by mental and mental exertion

Agantuki - indicative of bad prognosis leading imminent death

Vyadhyanuvaritini - caused as a complication of other diseases

Ratri-Swabhavaprabhava - caused by the very nature of the night.

Three types are described by *Acharya Sushruta*; *Vaishnavi* (formed by the sustaining deity, a natural one), *Tamasi*

and *Vaikariki* (due to diseases).⁽⁹⁾

Vaishnavi Nidra: It is a normal type of *Nidra* and it is the energy of god, which helps in maintaining the life of human being.

Vaikariki Nidra: This type of *Nidra* appears due to *Kapha dosha* and aggravated *Vata dosha* or due to any troubles which affects both mind and body.

Tamasi Nidra: It is the type of *Nidra* which appears due to influence of *Tamo guna*. It produces unconsciousness at the time of death.

Acharya Vagbhata has classified in seven types as following manner.⁽¹⁰⁾

Kalaswabhawaj - it is produces at the accustomed time. i.e. nights

Amayaja - it is produced due to effect of diseases

By fatigue of *Mana* - when *Mana* is exhausted

By fatigue of *Sharira* - when body is exhausted

Shleshmaprabhavaj - it is produced due to predominance of *Kapha*

Agantuka - this type of *Nidra* is produced by external factors e.g., traumatic etc.

Tamobhava - it is produced by predominance of *Tamoguna*.

Neurophysiology of Sleep

Sleep regulation involves two primary biological mechanisms:

Homeostatic Process (Process S):

Sleep pressure builds with prolonged wakefulness due to adenosine accumulation.⁽¹¹⁾

Circadian Rhythm (Process C):

Controlled by the suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN) in the hypothalamus; synchronizes the sleep–wake cycle with the 24-hour light–dark pattern.⁽¹²⁾

Key neurochemicals involved in sleep initiation and maintenance include:

Melatonin (promotes sleep, secreted by pineal gland in darkness)

GABA (inhibitory neurotransmitter that reduces neural activity)

Orexin (promotes wakefulness)

Stages of Sleep

Sleep is classified into Non-Rapid Eye Movement (NREM) and Rapid Eye Movement (REM) phases:

Non-Rapid Eye Movement (Non-REM or NREM) sleep - The American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) divides NREM into three stages: N1, N2, and N3, the last of which is also called delta sleep or slow wave sleep. The whole period normally proceeds in the order: N1 → N2 → N3 → N2 → REM.

Rapid Eye Movement (REM) Sleep- REM sleep occurs as a person returns to stage 2 or 1 from a deep sleep. A complete sleep cycle typically lasts around 90-100 minutes and a typical night sleep consists of 4-5 complete sleep cycles. Each sleep cycle is comprised of approximately 5 phases, with the first 4 cycles dedicated to Non-Rapid Eye Movement (NREM) sleep. The NREM cycles conclude before transitioning to the Rapid Eye Movement (REM) cycle.

Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep emerges approximately 90 minutes after the initiation of sleep and is notably deeper than any of the three phases of Non-REM sleep. REM sleep is characterized by swift eye movements, nearly complete body paralysis, and a tendency for dreaming.⁽¹³⁾

Benefits of *Nidra*

Proper sleep brings *Sukha* (happiness), *Pushti* (nourishment), *Bala* (strength), *Vrishata* (Potency/fertility), *Jnana* (knowledge) and *Jiva* (longevity) to a person.

Improper sleep cause *Dukha* (misery), *Karshya* (emaciation), *Abala* (weakness), *Klibata* (sterility), *Agyana* (ignorance) and *Marana* (death).

A person who desires long life should be indulge in *Kala Nidra* (Sleep in proper time).⁽¹⁴⁾

The aspects of happiness, nourishment strength, virility, knowledge and long life are attained by sound and timely

sleep whereas improper sleep leads to sorrow, emaciation, weakness, impotence, ignorance and even death.

Sleep is the time for rebuilding, construction. It is an anabolic event and is held to be as best as the divine elixir. If sleep is lost, *Vata* and *Pitta Dosha* are likely to be vitiated.⁽¹⁵⁾

Diwaswapna (Day Sleep)

Indications of *Diwaswapna*:

Sleeping during the day time can be prescribed for those who are *Karshita* (exhausted) by singing, *Adhyayana* (study), *Madya* (alcoholic drinks), *Stri* (sexual acts), *Karma-Panchakarma*-elimination therapy, *Bhara* (carrying heavy weight), *Adhva* (walking long distance)

Those suffering from *Ajirna* (indigestion), *Kshata* (injured), *Kshina* (debilitated), *Vridha* (old age), *Bala* (children), *Abala* (less strength), suffer from *Trishna* (thirst), *Atisara* (diarrhea), *Shula* (colic pain), *Shwasa* (dyspnoea), *Hikka* (hiccup), *Krishna* (emaciated), *Patita* (injured due to fall), *Abhihata* (injured due to assault), *Unmatta* (insanity), those exhausted by *Yana* (journey) by a vehicle, *Prajagara* (night asleep), afflicted with *Krodha* (anger), *Shoka* (grief), and *Bhaya* (fear) and *Divaswapna Uchita* (those who are accustomed to day sleep).

Divaswapna (day sleep) is not indicated in all *Ritu* except *Grishma Ritu*. In *Grishma Ritu Vata Dosha* is in accumulative stage (*Chaya*) and *Bala* is less so day sleep is indicated.⁽¹⁶⁾

Diwaswapna phala

Equilibrium of *dhatu*s and strength are maintained and *Kapha* nourishes the organs and ensures longevity.

Diva Swapna is indicated in *Grishmaritu*, as the nights become shorter and *Vata* gets aggravated in the body due to the *Ruksha Guna* of *Adana Kala*. Therefore, *Diva Swapna* in seasons other than *Grishmaritu* is not advisable as it aggravates *Kapha* and *Pitta*.

Chakrapani in *Ayurveda Dipika* says; the person who didn't sleep during night time, then half of that time during day time is sufficient to balance the healthy state. Day sleep should be undergone with empty stomach, after intake of food day sleep is contraindicated. By that practice even *Swastha* person also get *Rogi*.⁽¹⁷⁾

Diwaswapna Nishedha (Contraindications)

Sleeping during the daytime in the seasons other than summer is not advisable as it causes vitiation of *Kapha* and *Pitta*.

Persons with *Meda* (excessive fat), *Sneha Nitya* (those who are addicted to taking unctuous substances), *Shelsh mala* (those with *Kapha* constitution), *Shleshma Roga* (those suffering from disease due to the vitiation of *Kapha*) and *Dushi Visha* (those suffering from poisoning will increase the *Visha Vega*) should never sleep during day time.⁽¹⁸⁾

Ratrijagarana

Awakening during night causes *Rukshata* (roughness) in the body; sleep during day time causes *Snigdha* (unctuousness) and sleeping in sitting posture is not causing *Arukshata* or *Abhishyandi* (neither roughness nor unctuousness).⁽¹⁹⁾

According to *Acharya Caraka*, keeping awake at night increases *Vata* and *Pitta*.

Day sleep is definitely abnormal; it is unrighteousness (improper) on the part of the sleeper and aggravates all the *dosha*; from such aggravation, cough dyspnoea, nasal catarrh, feeling of heaviness of head, body aches, anorexia, fever and weakness of digestive fire develop. Even in those who kept awake at nights, the same disease produced by *Vata* and *Pitta* may arise.⁽²⁰⁾

Hence, persons should not keep awake at night and should avoid sleeping during day; knowing that both these aggravate the *Dosha*, the wise should indulge in sleep moderately, by doing so, the person will be free from disease, will have a pleasant mind, endowed with strength, color/complexion and virility; neither very stout nor very lean, with beautiful appearance and lives for a hundred years.

Nidra – An *Adharniya Vega*

According to *Acharya Caraka* following are some symptoms which appears due to *Nidravegadharana* (suppression of urge) of sleep - *Jrumbha* (yawning), *Angamarda* (body pain), *Tandra* (drowsiness), *siro-roga* (disorders related to head) and *Akshigaurava* (heaviness in eyes). The treatment for the *Nidra-vega-dharana-janya-lakhana* is to take proper *Nidra* (sound sleep) and *samvahana* (massage) over the hand and foot.⁽²¹⁾

According to *Acharya Vagbhata* the symptoms of *Nidra vegadharana* are as follows: *Moha*, *Murdha akshi*

gourava, Alasya, Jrumbha & Angamarda.⁽²²⁾

Acharya Sushruta mentioned that the *Nidravega-dharana-janya-lakshana* resembles to that of the diseases of *Vata* and *Pitta*. The symptoms includes *Kasa, swasa, Pratisyaya, Sirogaurava, Angamarda, Arochaka, Jwara, Agnidaurbalya.*⁽²³⁾

Nidranasha (Insomnia/Loss of sleep)

For loss of sleep, anointing the body. Oiling the head, massaging and trampling over the body are beneficial. Use of rice, wheat, flour of grains, eatables prepared from sugarcane juice are ideal food; such food being sweet in taste, unctuous, used along with milk and soup of meat etc; soup of meat of animals which lives in burrows, and of *Viskira* birds; *Draksha*, sugar and products of sugarcane juice should be used at nights; cot, seats and vehicles should be pleasant and soft; any other thing which bestows sleep may be adopted by the intelligent person.⁽²⁵⁾

Atinidra (Excessive sleep)

Sleeping excessively is considered a pathological condition which happens because of increase in *kapha dosha*. In such condition, treatments like *Dhumapana, Virechana, Nasya*, and *Langhana* are advised.

CONCLUSION

Sleep (*Nidra*) is not merely a passive state of rest but a dynamic and essential biological function, deeply rooted in both Ayurvedic tradition and modern scientific understanding. As emphasized in the *Bṛhatrayee*, proper sleep sustains strength, nourishment, cognition, fertility, and longevity, while its disturbance leads to weakness, disease, and premature aging. In today's fast-paced lifestyle, chronic sleep deprivation has emerged as a significant contributor to non-communicable diseases such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, anxiety, and depression.

Modern life, dominated by irregular schedules, digital exposure, and stress, has disrupted natural circadian rhythms, leading to an epidemic of insomnia and sleep-related disorders. The classical Ayurvedic wisdom, which advocates for timely, balanced, and *doṣha*-aligned sleep, offers timeless guidance for restoring health and harmony.

Therefore, recognizing sleep as a pillar of life and medicine is more important today than ever. Promoting awareness about the value of sleep—through both Ayurvedic lifestyle practices and modern sleep science—is essential to prevent disease and enhance quality of life in the current era.

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