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A CONCEPTUAL STUDY OF NIDRA: ITS PHYSIOLOGY, TYPES, AND ROLE IN HEALTH AND DISEASE

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ABSTRACT

Nidra is considered one of the essential factors for maintenance of life and health in Ayurveda. Along with Ahara and Brahmacharya, it is included under Trayopastambha, the three supporting pillars of the body. Proper sleep provides happiness, nourishment, strength, reproductive capacity, knowledge, and longevity, whereas inadequate, excessive, or untimely sleep may contribute to physical and psychological disturbances. Classical Ayurvedic texts explain that sleep occurs when the mind and sensory organs become fatigued and withdraw from their respective objects. Physiological Kapha and Tamas support the initiation of sleep, whereas increased Vata, Pitta, Rajas, mental stress, pain, excessive physical activity, fasting, and emotional disturbances may interfere with normal sleep. Different types of Nidra have been described according to their causative factors, including natural nocturnal sleep and sleep arising from Kapha, mental fatigue, physical exhaustion, disease, and Tamas. The present conceptual review studies the physiological basis, types, benefits, pathological alterations, causes of Nidranasha, effects of Divaswapna and Ratrijagarana, and principles of management described in Ayurveda. The review shows that healthy sleep depends not only on duration but also on appropriate timing, individual requirement, season, age, constitution, physical activity, diet, and mental condition. Thus, proper Nidra forms an important component of Swasthavritta and contributes significantly to preservation of physical health, mental stability, sensory efficiency, digestion, strength, and quality of life.

Keywords: Nidra, Trayopastambha, Nidranasha, Divaswapna, Ratrijagarana, Swasthavritta

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda is a comprehensive system of medicine that gives primary importance to preservation of health along with prevention and management of disease. A healthy state is maintained through proper food, lifestyle, behaviour, seasonal regimen, regulation of natural urges, and adequate rest. Among these factors, Ahara, Nidra, and Brahmacharya are described by Acharya Charaka as Trayopastambha, or three supporting pillars of life. When these are followed appropriately, they support strength, complexion, growth, nourishment, and longevity. The inclusion of Nidra among these fundamental supports indicates that sleep is not merely a period of inactivity but a necessary physiological state required for restoration and maintenance of normal functions of both body and mind.¹

The importance of sleep is further emphasized by the classical statement that happiness and unhappiness, nourishment and emaciation, strength and weakness, sexual potency and impotence, knowledge and ignorance, and even life and death are influenced by proper or improper sleep. Appropriate sleep taken at the proper time maintains equilibrium, while excessive sleep, inadequate sleep, or sleep at an unsuitable time can disturb normal physiological functions. Therefore, Nidra has an important role in tissue nourishment, mental stability, sensory efficiency, digestive capacity, physical endurance, reproductive health, and overall wellbeing.²

Modern lifestyle commonly involves late-night work, prolonged use of electronic devices, irregular meal timings, occupational stress, mental overactivity, insufficient physical rest, night shifts, and reduced exposure to natural daily routines. These factors can alter normal sleep habits and contribute to fatigue and disturbed wellbeing. Ayurvedic principles provide a broad approach to sleep by considering its quantity, quality, timing, seasonal variation, age, constitution, activity, mental state, and disease condition. A conceptual examination of Nidra is therefore important for understanding its physiological role and its relationship with both health and disease.^{3,4}

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present work is a conceptual review based mainly on classical Ayurvedic literature. Relevant references related to Nidra were collected from Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Ashtanga Hridaya with standard commentaries and Chaukhambha publications. Classical descriptions concerning Trayopastambha, definition and physiology of sleep, types of Nidra, benefits of adequate sleep, consequences of excessive and deficient sleep, indications and contraindications of daytime sleep, effects of night awakening, causes and symptoms of Nidranasha, and measures promoting sleep were reviewed. The collected information was arranged systematically and interpreted conceptually to understand the role of Nidra in maintenance of health and development of disease.⁵

CONCEPTUAL STUDY

Nidra

The term Nidra denotes a natural state of reduced external awareness in which the activities of the mind and sensory organs become temporarily withdrawn from their respective objects. According to Acharya Charaka, when the mind becomes exhausted and the sensory organs

become fatigued, they cease to remain actively engaged with their objects and sleep develops. Perception in Ayurveda depends upon coordination among Atma, Manas, Indriya, and Indriyarth. During sleep, the temporary disengagement of Manas from sensory activity reduces awareness of the external environment. Thus, Nidra is understood as an organized psychophysiological state involving rest of the body, sensory system, and mind rather than simply absence of wakefulness.⁶

Acharya Charaka describes Ahara, Nidra, and Brahmacharya as three Upastambha that support the body. Appropriate observance of these pillars helps maintain health, physical development, strength, and longevity. Food provides material nourishment, regulated conduct conserves physical and mental energy, and sleep allows restoration after activity. Disturbance of any one of these pillars can influence the other two. For example, inadequate sleep can affect appetite and digestion, whereas unsuitable food and irregular lifestyle can interfere with sleep. This interrelationship explains why Nidra has an important position in the preventive and promotive principles of Ayurveda.⁷

The physiological production of sleep is explained mainly through fatigue of Manas and Indriya, predominance of Tamas, and supportive influence of Kapha. Tamas promotes inactivity and withdrawal from external awareness, while the heavy, stable, slow, cool, and unctuous qualities of Kapha favour physical and mental relaxation. During the natural night period, these qualities facilitate withdrawal of sensory activity and allow restorative sleep. On the other hand, increased Vata causes movement, instability, dryness, and restlessness, while aggravated Pitta may produce heat and increased activity. Excessive Rajas maintains mental stimulation. Therefore, increased Vata, Pitta, or Rajas may prevent normal relaxation and interfere with the initiation or maintenance of sleep.⁸

Ayurvedic texts classify sleep according to its cause. Charaka describes sleep arising from Tamas, increased Kapha, mental exhaustion, physical exhaustion, disease, and the natural influence of night. Natural nocturnal sleep, called Ratri-svabhava-prabhava Nidra, is physiological and beneficial when taken in proper quantity. Sleep due to excessive Kapha is associated with heaviness and lethargy, while Manah-shrama-sambhava Nidra follows mental fatigue and Sharira-shrama-sambhava Nidra develops after physical exhaustion. Sleep may also occur as a manifestation of disease. The classification shows that all sleep is not necessarily healthy; its significance depends upon its cause, timing, duration, and effect on the person.⁹

Proper sleep is described as a source of Sukha, Pushti, Bala, Vrishata, Jnana, and maintenance of life. During adequate sleep, physical activity decreases, sensory organs receive rest, mental activity becomes reduced, and the body obtains an opportunity for restoration. A person who sleeps adequately generally experiences freshness, enthusiasm, improved concentration, physical comfort, and better capacity to perform daily activities. From an Ayurvedic viewpoint, sleep contributes to appropriate tissue nourishment, maintenance of strength, digestive stability, sensory efficiency, mental clarity, reproductive health, and endurance. Thus, healthy sleep is essential for maintaining equilibrium between Sharira, Indriya, and Manas.¹⁰

The nature of sleep may vary according to Dosha predominance. Kapha-dominant individuals generally have deeper, longer, and more stable sleep because of Guru, Snigdha, Manda, and Sthira qualities. Persons with Pitta predominance may experience moderate sleep and may be

disturbed by heat, hunger, or increased internal activity. Vata-dominant individuals are more likely to have light, irregular, interrupted, or insufficient sleep because Vata possesses Chala, Laghu, Ruksha, and Sukshma properties. These constitutional differences support the Ayurvedic principle that sleep requirement should be individualized rather than fixed equally for every person.¹¹

NIDRANASHA OR INADEQUATE SLEEP

Nidranasha refers to reduction, disturbance, or absence of normal sleep. It may develop due to increased Vata or Pitta, mental stress, fear, grief, anger, excessive thinking, fasting, excessive physical activity, pain, disease, uncomfortable surroundings, or habitual night awakening. Classical manifestations associated with inadequate sleep include yawning, body ache, heaviness or discomfort of the head, lassitude, fatigue, dizziness, indigestion, weakness, and disturbances caused by aggravated Vata. Persistent inadequate sleep can reduce physical efficiency and disturb attention, appetite, digestion, mood, and daily performance. Thus, Nidranasha reflects disturbance of both physical and psychological equilibrium.¹²

ATINIDRA OR EXCESSIVE SLEEP

Excessive sleep is also considered harmful because it increases qualities similar to Kapha and Tamas. A person sleeping beyond physiological requirement may experience heaviness, lethargy, reduced enthusiasm, sluggish digestion, excessive drowsiness, and decreased physical activity. Habitual oversleeping can disturb the normal balance between activity and rest. Ayurveda therefore does not consider a greater quantity of sleep automatically beneficial. The appropriate amount depends upon age, constitution, season, physical activity, disease, nutritional state, and previous sleep loss. The objective is Yuktiyukta Nidra, or sleep appropriate to the individual requirement, rather than excessive or deficient sleep.¹³

DIVASWAPNA

Divaswapna, or daytime sleep, is generally restricted because sleeping during the day increases Kapha and may produce heaviness and impairment of normal metabolic activity. However, Ayurveda provides important exceptions. Daytime sleep may be beneficial during summer and for persons exhausted by travelling, physical work, sexual activity, prolonged walking, carrying heavy loads, study, illness, injury, wasting, old age, or inadequate nocturnal sleep. In such circumstances, daytime rest can compensate for physical depletion. Therefore, Divaswapna is neither universally prohibited nor universally advised; its suitability depends upon season, strength, constitution, activity, and health condition.¹⁴

RATRIJAGARANA

Ratrijagarana means remaining awake during the period naturally meant for nighttime sleep. Habitual night awakening is considered Vata-aggravating because prolonged wakefulness produces Rukshata, fatigue, instability, and depletion of strength. Ayurveda states that daytime sleep tends to produce Snigdhatva, while remaining awake at night produces Rukshatva. Regular disruption of the natural night-rest cycle may therefore affect physical comfort, digestion, sensory efficiency, and mental freshness. Occasional awakening may occur according to

necessity, but persistent reversal of the natural sleep-wake pattern is regarded as unsuitable for maintenance of normal Dosha equilibrium.¹⁵

NIDRA ACCORDING TO AGE AND SEASON

Sleep requirement naturally changes with age and environmental conditions. Children generally require more sleep because growth and tissue development are dominant, whereas elderly individuals may experience lighter and shorter sleep due to increasing Vata. Seasonal changes are also considered important. During summer, reduced strength, heat, dryness, and shorter nights may justify daytime sleep in appropriate individuals. During seasons associated with Kapha predominance, unnecessary daytime sleep can further increase heaviness and should generally be avoided. This indicates that Ayurvedic recommendations regarding sleep are dynamic and must be adjusted according to Kala, Vaya, Prakriti, Bala, and individual requirement.¹⁶

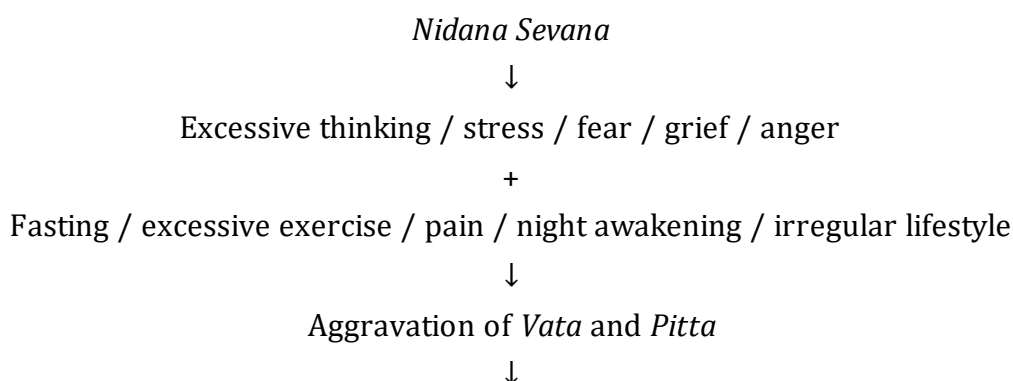
CAUSES OF DISTURBED NIDRA

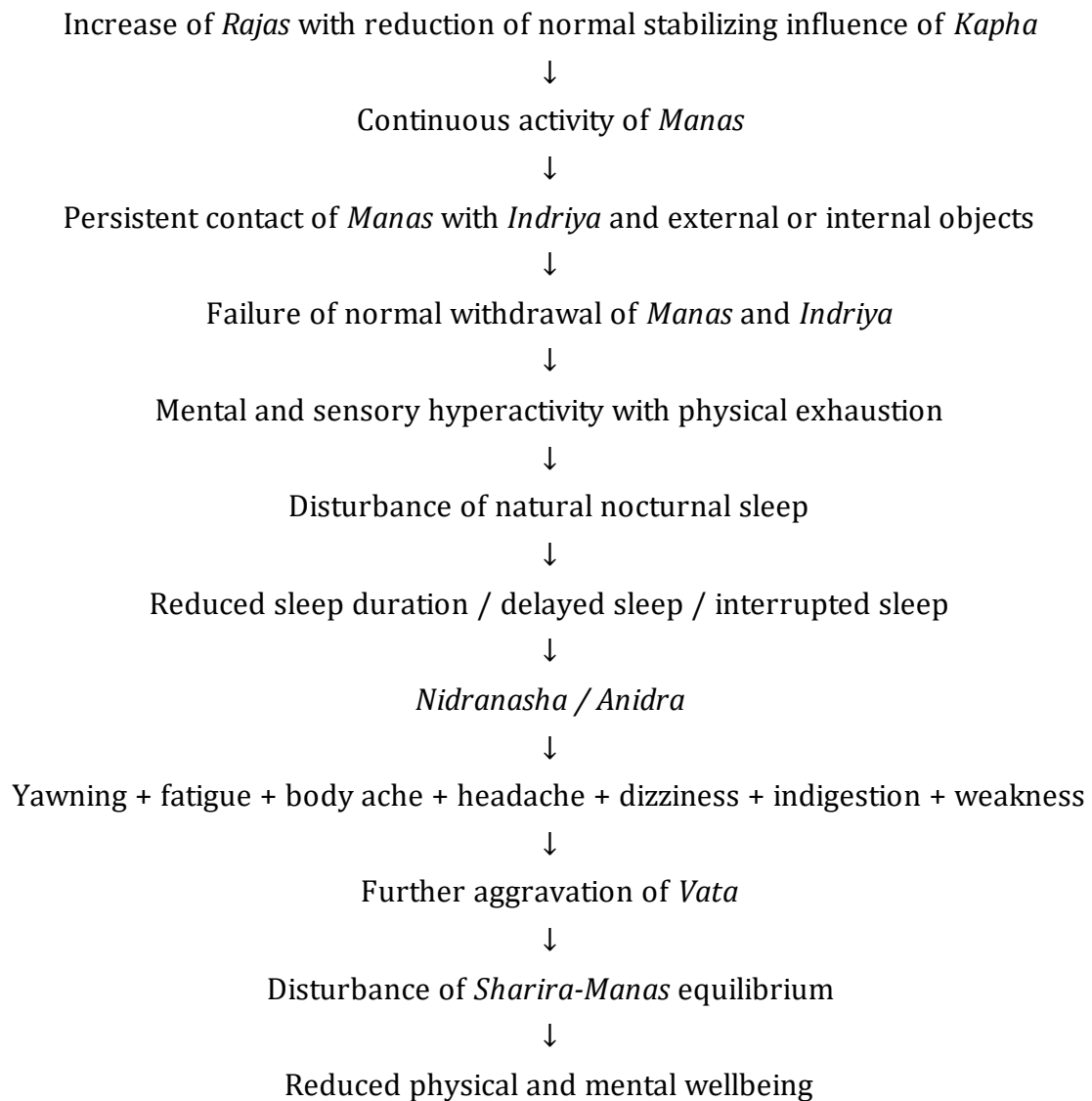
Disturbed sleep can arise from physical, dietary, psychological, behavioural, and environmental causes. Excessive exercise, fasting, inadequate food, pain, illness, excessive purification procedures, night awakening, uncomfortable bedding, noise, fear, anger, grief, worry, excessive thinking, and increased mental activity may reduce sleep. These factors commonly increase Vata, Pitta, or Rajas and oppose the stable and relaxing influence of Kapha and Tamas. Identification of the causative factor is essential because management should not be limited to producing sleep temporarily; the underlying disturbance in diet, activity, mental state, environment, or Dosha should also be corrected.¹⁷

MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES OF NIDRANASHA

Classical management of Nidranasha aims to create physical and mental conditions favourable for natural sleep. Measures include Abhyanga, Utsadana, bath, application of oil to the head, comfortable bedding, pleasant surroundings, nourishing and suitable food, milk, agreeable smell, soothing sound, mental satisfaction, relaxation, and freedom from disturbing thoughts. Where Vata aggravation, depletion, overexertion, or fasting is present, nourishing and unctuous measures are especially useful. Psychological comfort is equally important because fear, grief, anxiety, and excessive thinking may prevent normal withdrawal of Manas. Hence, treatment should be individualized according to cause, constitution, strength, and associated disease.¹⁸

SAMPRAPTI OF NIDRANASHA





FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

- *Nidra* is one of the three *Trayopastambha* essential for maintenance of life and health.
- Natural sleep occurs when *Manas* and *Indriya* withdraw from their respective objects.
- Physiological *Kapha* and *Tamas* facilitate relaxation and sleep.
- Natural nighttime sleep is considered the most appropriate physiological form of sleep.
- Ayurveda describes different types of sleep according to their causative factors.
- Proper sleep supports happiness, nourishment, strength, reproductive capacity, knowledge, and longevity.
- Sleep requirement varies according to age, *Prakriti*, season, strength, activity, nutritional state, and disease condition.
- *Vata*, *Pitta*, and excessive *Rajas* can interfere with normal sleep.
- Excessive sleep may produce *Kapha*-related heaviness, lethargy, and reduced activity.
- Inadequate sleep may cause fatigue, body ache, yawning, weakness, indigestion, dizziness, and impaired mental efficiency.

- *Divaswapna* is generally restricted but is useful in selected conditions such as summer, exhaustion, illness, old age, and tissue depletion.
- Habitual *Ratrijagarana* increases *Rukshata* and aggravates *Vata*.
- Mental stress, fear, grief, excessive thinking, fasting, pain, and overexertion are important causes of disturbed sleep.
- Ayurvedic management of *Nidranasha* includes correction of causative factors, nourishment, *Abhyanga*, relaxation, appropriate food, comfortable surroundings, and psychological reassurance.
- Healthy sleep is an important component of *Swasthavritta* and contributes to prevention of disease.

DISCUSSION

The classical description of *Nidra* demonstrates that Ayurveda considers sleep a coordinated state involving the body, mind, sensory organs, *Dosha*, and natural daily rhythm. The explanation that sleep occurs when *Manas* and *Indriya* become fatigued and withdraw from their objects provides a physiological basis for reduced external awareness during sleep. The association of sleep with *Kapha* and *Tamas* also corresponds conceptually with stability, heaviness, relaxation, and reduced activity. In contrast, *Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Rajas* possess qualities that promote movement, activity, stimulation, or instability and can therefore interfere with sleep when increased. This shows that Ayurveda interprets sleep as the result of an equilibrium between activating and relaxing physiological and psychological influences.¹⁹

An important feature of the Ayurvedic approach is that it does not prescribe the same amount or pattern of sleep for every person. Age, constitution, season, occupation, physical exertion, nutritional condition, illness, and previous sleep deprivation modify the requirement for rest. The recommendations regarding *Divaswapna* clearly demonstrate this individualized approach. Although daytime sleep is generally avoided because of its *Kapha*-increasing effect, it is specifically permitted in summer and in persons suffering from exhaustion, emaciation, illness, old age, or loss of nighttime sleep. Similarly, excessive sleep is not considered beneficial simply because sleep itself is necessary. Health depends upon appropriate sleep in accordance with *Kala*, *Prakriti*, *Vaya*, and *Bala*.²⁰

The concept of *Nidra* further demonstrates the close relationship between physical health and mental wellbeing. Fear, grief, anger, stress, and excessive thinking can disturb sleep by maintaining activity of *Manas*, while inadequate sleep subsequently produces fatigue, weakness, reduced concentration, digestive disturbance, and increased *Vata*. This may create a continuing cycle of mental stimulation and insufficient physiological restoration. Consequently, Ayurvedic management includes more than measures intended merely to induce sleep. It emphasizes correction of diet and lifestyle, reduction of excessive activity, adequate nourishment, *Abhyanga*, comfortable surroundings, pleasant sensory experiences, and psychological relaxation. Properly timed and adequate *Nidra* can therefore be considered an important preventive and promotive measure for maintaining *Sharira-Manas* equilibrium and overall health.²¹

CONCLUSION

Nidra is a fundamental physiological requirement and one of the three Trayopastambha described in Ayurveda. Its physiological occurrence depends upon relaxation and withdrawal of Manas and Indriya, with important roles of Kapha and Tamas. Appropriate sleep supports nourishment, strength, happiness, knowledge, reproductive capacity, mental stability, and longevity, while excessive, deficient, or untimely sleep can disturb normal physiological and psychological functions. Divaswapna and Ratrijagarana should be understood according to individual need, season, constitution, activity, and health condition rather than as absolute rules. The prevention and management of sleep disturbance require correction of causative factors, appropriate diet and lifestyle, physical relaxation, mental comfort, and maintenance of natural daily rhythm. Thus, healthy Nidra is an essential component of Swasthavritta and has a significant role in preservation of health and prevention of disease.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST - Nil.

SOURCE OF SUPPORT - None.

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