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A CONCEPTUAL STUDY OF NIDRA AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN AYURVEDA

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ABSTRACT

Nidra is one of the essential physiological requirements of human life and occupies an important position in Ayurveda. Classical texts describe Ahara, Nidra, and Brahmacharya as Trayopastambha, the three supporting pillars responsible for maintaining health and longevity. Proper sleep provides physical strength, nourishment, happiness, knowledge, fertility, and stability of the body and mind, whereas inadequate, excessive, or untimely sleep may disturb normal physiological and psychological functions. According to Ayurveda, sleep occurs when the mind and sensory organs become exhausted and withdraw from their respective objects. Tamas and Kapha have an important role in the initiation and maintenance of sleep. Classical texts also describe different types of Nidra, physiological benefits of normal sleep, harmful effects of Nidranasha, excessive sleep, daytime sleep, and night awakening. The present conceptual review evaluates the classical understanding of Nidra, its mechanism, types, factors affecting sleep, consequences of disturbed sleep, and its significance in maintaining health. The study indicates that maintenance of appropriate quantity, quality, and timing of sleep is an important component of Swasthavritta and may support physical health, mental stability, sensory efficiency, digestion, immunity, and quality of life.

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

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda gives equal importance to preservation of health and management of disease. Health is maintained through appropriate food, lifestyle, behaviour, and regulation of natural biological activities. Among the daily requirements of life, Ahara, Nidra, and Brahmacharya are collectively

described as Trayopastambha. These three factors support the body in a manner similar to supporting pillars. When properly followed, they promote strength, complexion, growth, nourishment, and longevity. Thus, Nidra is not considered merely a period of inactivity but an essential physiological state necessary for normal functioning of the body and mind.¹

Acharya Charaka has given considerable importance to sleep and explained that happiness and misery, nourishment and emaciation, strength and weakness, sexual potency and impotence, knowledge and ignorance, and even life and death may depend upon proper or improper sleep. This description emphasizes the wide influence of Nidra on physical, mental, reproductive, and intellectual health. Appropriate sleep obtained at the proper time therefore has a nourishing effect comparable to a properly planned diet, whereas disturbed sleep can become an important causative factor for ill health.²

The classical understanding of Nidra is especially significant in the present lifestyle, where irregular working hours, excessive mental activity, prolonged screen exposure, emotional stress, late-night activities, and altered food habits frequently disturb natural sleep patterns. Ayurveda considers both excessive sleep and insufficient sleep harmful and recommends sleep according to age, constitution, season, physical activity, disease condition, and individual requirement. Therefore, understanding the physiological basis and clinical importance of Nidra can contribute to preventive health care as well as rational management of sleep-related disturbances.³

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This is a conceptual review based mainly on classical Ayurvedic literature. Relevant descriptions of Nidra were reviewed from Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Ashtanga Hridaya along with their standard commentaries published by Chaukhambha publications. Information related to Trayopastambha, mechanism and types of sleep, benefits of physiological sleep, effects of Divaswapna and Ratrijagarana, manifestations of sleep deprivation, and principles for restoration of sleep were collected, organized, compared, and interpreted conceptually.⁴

CONCEPTUAL STUDY OF NIDRA

The word Nidra represents the natural state in which awareness of external objects is temporarily reduced and the activities of the mind and sense organs become relaxed. According to Charaka, sleep occurs when the mind becomes exhausted and the sensory organs withdraw from their respective objects. Since perception requires coordination between Atma, Manas, Indriya, and their objects, temporary disengagement of the mind from sensory activity results in sleep. This explanation indicates that sleep is a coordinated psychophysiological process rather than simple physical inactivity.⁵

AYURVEDIC REVIEW

Nidra as Trayopastambha

Acharya Charaka describes Ahara, Nidra, and Brahmacharya as three Upastambha or supporting pillars of life. Proper observance of these factors maintains the body and supports normal growth, strength, and longevity. The inclusion of sleep with food and regulated conduct demonstrates its fundamental role in preservation of health. A person may receive adequate nutrition, but persistent disturbance of sleep can interfere with restoration, mental efficiency,

appetite, strength, and general wellbeing. Hence, regulation of sleep is considered an important part of Swasthavritta.⁶

Physiology of Nidra

The development of Nidra is primarily associated with fatigue of the mind and sensory organs and predominance of Tamas. When the mind becomes tired and is unable to maintain active contact with sensory objects, the sense organs also become inactive and sleep occurs. Kapha, because of its heavy, stable, slow, and unctuous qualities, facilitates relaxation and sleep. In contrast, predominance of Vata and Pitta, mental agitation, pain, fear, excessive thinking, fasting, and physical discomfort can interfere with sleep. Therefore, normal sleep depends on harmonious interaction between physical exhaustion, sensory withdrawal, mental relaxation, Dosha balance, and the natural night cycle.⁷

Types of Nidra

Charaka describes different forms of sleep according to their causative factors. These include sleep caused by Tamas, increased Kapha, mental exhaustion, physical exhaustion, disease, and the natural influence of night. Natural nocturnal sleep, termed Ratri-svabhava-prabhava Nidra, represents physiological sleep occurring as part of the normal daily rhythm and is regarded as beneficial when obtained in appropriate quantity. Sleep caused by pathological Kapha, disease, or excessive Tamas differs from normal restorative sleep because it may occur as a manifestation of disturbed physiological balance.⁸

Benefits of Proper Nidra

Proper sleep obtained at the appropriate time promotes Sukha, Pushti, Bala, Vrishata, Jnana, and healthy maintenance of life. Physiologically, satisfactory sleep provides rest to the sensory organs, muscles, nervous activity, and mind. It contributes to restoration of physical energy, mental freshness, stable appetite, appropriate tissue nourishment, and capacity for work. A person with adequate sleep generally awakens with freshness, lightness, enthusiasm, and improved sensory and cognitive functioning. Thus, sleep is an essential restorative process influencing both Sharira and Manas.⁹

Effects of Inadequate Sleep

Loss or suppression of normal sleep is described as Nidranasha or Anidra. Classical manifestations include body ache, heaviness or discomfort in the head, yawning, lassitude, fatigue, dizziness, indigestion, drowsiness without satisfactory sleep, and disturbances associated with Vata. Long-standing inadequate sleep may impair enthusiasm, concentration, digestive efficiency, physical strength, emotional balance, and work capacity. Since wakefulness increases qualities similar to Vata, prolonged night awakening particularly promotes dryness and functional instability. Therefore, habitual sleep deprivation should not be considered harmless.¹⁰

Effects of Excessive Sleep

Just as inadequate sleep is harmful, excessive sleep may also disturb normal health. Prolonged or inappropriate sleep increases heaviness, lethargy, sluggishness, and Kapha-dominant qualities. It can reduce enthusiasm and physical activity and may contribute to impaired digestive and metabolic functions. Sleep taken beyond individual physiological need can

therefore result in imbalance rather than additional restoration. The Ayurvedic principle is not simply to increase sleep duration but to maintain Yuktiyukta Nidra, meaning sleep appropriate to the person's constitution, age, season, activity, and health condition.¹¹

Divaswapna – Daytime Sleep

Divaswapna is generally restricted in Ayurveda because sleeping during the daytime increases Kapha and Pitta, particularly when practised habitually without indication. It may produce heaviness, impaired digestion, obstruction in body channels, and metabolic disturbance. However, daytime sleep is not universally prohibited. It may be useful during summer and in individuals exhausted by physical work, sexual activity, travelling, prolonged walking, illness, emaciation, old age, or other conditions producing tissue depletion. Thus, the recommendation is individualized rather than absolute. Daytime sleep should be adopted only when physiological need and seasonal conditions justify it.¹²

Ratrijagarana – Night Awakening

Habitual awakening at night is considered detrimental because nighttime is naturally intended for rest and restoration. Ratrijagarana increases dryness and aggravates Vata, resulting in fatigue, reduced strength, bodily discomfort, and impaired normal functioning. Classical principles indicate that sleeping during the day produces Snigdha effects, remaining awake at night produces Ruksha effects, while sleeping in a sitting posture is comparatively less likely to cause excessive unctuousness or dryness. These observations reflect the importance given to timing and posture in determining the physiological consequences of rest and wakefulness.¹³

Management Principles for Nidranasha

The management of Nidranasha aims at reducing mental and physical hyperactivity and promoting comfortable, relaxed conditions conducive to sleep. Classical measures include Abhyanga, Utsadana, bath, nourishing foods, milk, pleasant smell, soothing sound, comfortable bedding, peaceful surroundings, psychological reassurance, and avoidance of anxiety-producing activities. Measures selected should depend on the cause and condition of the individual. Where Vata aggravation, excessive exertion, fasting, fear, grief, or mental stress is responsible, treatment should particularly emphasize nourishment, unctuousness, relaxation, and restoration of physical and psychological comfort.¹⁴

SAMPRAPTI OF NIDRANASHA

Nidana Sevana



Excessive mental work / stress / fear / grief / excessive fasting / excessive exercise / night awakening



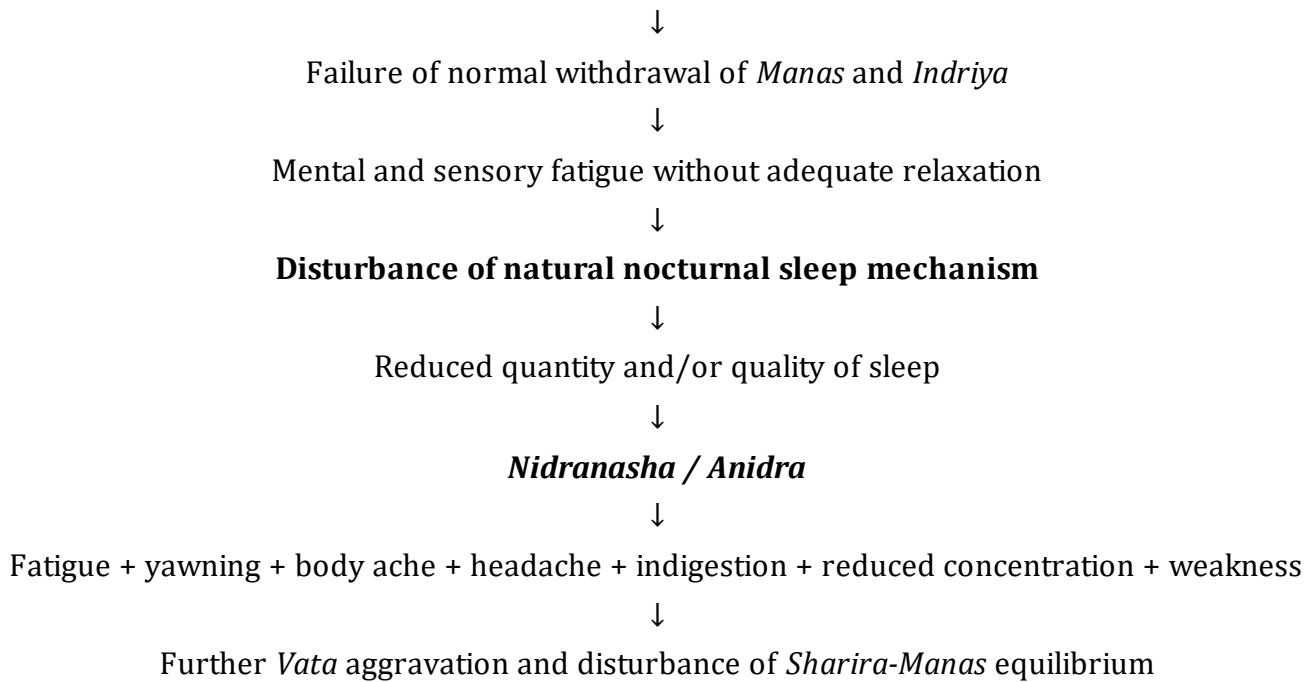
Aggravation of *Vata* and *Pitta* with reduction of physiological *Kapha*



Increase of *Rajas* and instability of *Manas*



Persistent contact of *Manas* with sensory objects and thoughts



FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

- *Nidra* is one of the three major supporting pillars, or *Trayopastambha*, of healthy life.
- Physiological sleep results from withdrawal of *Manas* and *Indriya* from external sensory objects.
- *Tamas* and physiological *Kapha* facilitate the initiation of sleep.
- Natural nighttime sleep is the most appropriate form of physiological sleep.
- Proper sleep supports happiness, nourishment, strength, reproductive health, knowledge, and longevity.
- Both insufficient and excessive sleep are considered harmful.
- Habitual night awakening predominantly produces dryness and aggravation of *Vata*.
- Unnecessary daytime sleep can increase *Kapha* and metabolic heaviness but is indicated in selected individuals and seasons.
- Sleep requirement varies according to age, constitution, physical activity, season, health status, and exhaustion.
- *Nidranasha* may result from mental stress, fear, grief, excessive thinking, fasting, exertion, illness, and *Dosha* imbalance.
- Management of disturbed sleep emphasizes relaxation, nourishment, *Abhyanga*, comfortable surroundings, appropriate diet, and correction of causative factors.
- Regular and appropriately timed sleep is an important component of preventive *Ayurvedic* health care.

DISCUSSION

The classical description of *Nidra* demonstrates that Ayurveda considers sleep a multidimensional physiological phenomenon involving the body, sensory organs, mind, and

environmental rhythm. The explanation that sleep develops following fatigue and withdrawal of Manas and Indriya provides a logical model for understanding reduced sensory responsiveness during sleep. The involvement of Tamas and Kapha explains the heaviness, stability, inactivity, and reduced external awareness associated with sleep. At the same time, Vata and Pitta aggravation, mental stimulation, emotional disturbances, and physical discomfort oppose these qualities and may interfere with sleep initiation or maintenance.¹⁵

A major strength of the Ayurvedic concept is its emphasis on balance rather than a fixed quantity of sleep applicable to every person. Proper Nidra varies with age, season, constitution, occupation, physical exertion, disease, and nutritional state. This individualized approach is clearly visible in the recommendations concerning Divaswapna. Although daytime sleep is generally discouraged because of its Kapha-increasing effect, exceptions are provided for summer, exhaustion, wasting, illness, old age, and similar conditions. The same principle applies to sleep deprivation: an occasional disturbance may be tolerated, but habitual Ratrijagarana can disturb Dosha balance and progressively impair physiological functioning.¹⁶

The concept of Nidra also shows the close relationship between physical and psychological health recognized in Ayurveda. Mental stress, grief, fear, excessive thinking, and sensory overactivity may prevent normal withdrawal of the mind, while disturbed sleep subsequently produces fatigue, reduced concentration, altered digestion, weakness, and emotional instability. This creates a cycle in which disturbed mental activity impairs sleep and inadequate sleep further reduces physical and mental resilience. Consequently, management is not restricted to inducing sleep but includes correction of diet, lifestyle, mental state, physical comfort, and Dosha imbalance. Regular observance of appropriate sleep habits can therefore be considered an important preventive measure for maintaining Sharira-Manas equilibrium and overall health.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Nidra is a fundamental physiological requirement and one of the Trayopastambha described in Ayurveda. Proper sleep obtained at the correct time and according to individual requirement supports nourishment, strength, happiness, mental clarity, sensory efficiency, reproductive health, and longevity. Inadequate sleep, excessive sleep, inappropriate daytime sleep, and habitual night awakening disturb normal Dosha balance and may adversely affect both body and mind. The classical understanding of Nidra emphasizes regularity, individualized sleep requirement, natural nocturnal sleep, proper lifestyle, mental relaxation, and correction of causative factors in sleep disturbance. Thus, maintenance of healthy sleep should be regarded as an essential component of Swasthavritta and preventive health care.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST - Nil.

SOURCE OF SUPPORT - None.

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