



World Journal of Pharmaceutical Science & Technology

Journal homepage: www.wjpst.com

Review Article

"TRIVIDHA HETU IN AYURVEDA: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF FUNDAMENTAL ETIOLOGICAL FACTORS IN HEALTH AND DISEASE"

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Received: 15-03-2026, Revised: 22-03-2026, Accepted: 25-04-2026

ABSTRACT

Introduction Ayurveda offers a unique framework for understanding disease causation through *Hetu* (etiological factors), which integrates sensory behavior, intellectual conduct, and the impact of time. *Trividha Hetu*, a classical Ayurvedic concept, identifies three fundamental causes of disease: *Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga* (improper sensory contact), *Prajñāparādha* (intellectual error), and *Pariṇāma* (time or transformation). These factors are considered universal in disease origin. **Methods** This review explores the classical descriptions of *Trividha Hetu* by analyzing primary Ayurvedic texts, such as *Caraka Saṃhitā*, *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, and modern interpretations. The interrelationship between these causes is examined in the context of Ayurvedic pathology (*Roga Vijñāna*) and contemporary health challenges. **Results** The *Trividha Hetu* model underscores that disease arises from sensory mismanagement (*Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga*), cognitive failure (*Prajñāparādha*), and temporal factors (*Pariṇāma*). Excessive or inappropriate sensory exposure, intellectual transgression, and improper adaptation to time contribute to doshic imbalances, weakened digestion (*Agnimandya*), and metabolic disturbances. **Discussion** By correlating these ancient insights with modern psychosomatic disorders and lifestyle-related diseases, the *Trividha Hetu* model provides a comprehensive understanding of disease that transcends symptomatic treatment. The framework's relevance is particularly significant in addressing contemporary issues such as stress, dietary imbalance, and chronic diseases. This holistic approach supports preventive and personalized healthcare practices.

Keywords: Trividha Hetu, Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga, Prajñāparādha, Pariṇāma, Ayurveda, Disease causation

1. Introduction

Ayurveda, the ancient science of life, offers a holistic and integrated approach to health and disease. Unlike modern biomedical systems, which primarily focus on symptoms and disease pathophysiology, Ayurveda emphasizes identifying and addressing the root causes of illness. The treatment philosophy of Ayurveda is founded on the principle of *Nidāna Parivarjana*—elimination or avoidance of causative factors. This preventive approach underscores the importance of maintaining balance and harmony between the mind, body, and environment.

Central to Ayurvedic pathology (*Roga Vijñāna*) is the concept of *Hetu*, or causative factors, which disrupt the equilibrium of the body's fundamental energies (*Doṣa*), tissues (*Dhātu*), and waste products (*Mala*). The Ayurvedic texts emphasize that disease does not arise without cause; the path to healing lies in recognizing and addressing these

causes. Among the various classifications of *Hetu* in classical texts, *Trividha Hetu* stands out as a comprehensive and universal model that applies to both physical (*Śārīrika*) and mental (*Mānasika*) disorders. The three causes—*Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga*, *Prajñāparādha*, and *Pariṇāma*—are regarded as the primary etiological factors responsible for disease.^{1,2}

This section sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how these three fundamental causes of disease—*Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga* (improper sensory contact), *Prajñāparādha* (intellectual error), and *Pariṇāma* (time or transformation)—serve as the cornerstone of Ayurvedic understanding of disease causation. The review aims to critically examine the conceptual foundations, pathophysiological mechanisms, interrelationship, and modern-day relevance of *Trividha Hetu* in promoting preventive and curative healthcare.³

2. Nirukti and Conceptual Meaning of Hetu

The term *Hetu* is derived from the Sanskrit root “*Hi*”, meaning to impel, initiate, or cause. *Nirukti* defines *Hetu* as “*Hīyate anena iti Hetuḥ*”, signifying that which initiates or brings about an event. In the context of Ayurveda, *Hetu* refers to all internal and external factors that disturb the delicate balance of the body's energies and functions. These factors lead to vitiation of the *Doṣas* (*Vāta*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha*), resulting in disease.

Hetu can be classified into various types based on its role in disease causation. Classical texts use several synonymous terms to describe causative factors, such as:

- *Nidāna*—diagnostic causes
- *Kāraṇa*—root causes or factors
- *Nimitta*—proximal causes
- *Āyatana*—sources or seats of disease

Each of these terms highlights a different dimension of causation. However, *Hetu* encompasses all these aspects and serves as a foundational principle in Ayurvedic pathology. The identification and elimination of *Hetu* form the basis for preventing disease and restoring health. The most influential framework for understanding *Hetu* in Ayurveda is the concept of *Trividha Hetu*, which identifies three primary causes responsible for all diseases.^{4,5}

3. Importance of Hetu in Ayurvedic Philosophy

The concept of *Hetu* holds profound significance in Ayurveda due to several reasons, which are outlined below:

- **Foundation of Disease Origin:** According to Ayurveda, disease originates when there is a disruption in the equilibrium of the *Doṣas* (bodily humors), *Dhātus* (tissues), or *Mala* (waste products). This imbalance is often caused by the presence of improper *Hetu*, which can be of internal or external origin.
- **First Component of Nidāna Pañcaka:** In Ayurvedic diagnostics, *Hetu* is the first of the five diagnostic components of *Nidāna Pañcaka* (fivefold diagnosis). The other components—*Pūrvārūpa* (pre-symptoms), *Rūpa* (clinical features), *Upashaya* (remedy response), and *Samprāpti* (pathogenesis)—depend on the identification of *Hetu* for accurate diagnosis and effective treatment.
- **Basis for Preventive and Curative Treatment:** The identification of *Hetu* enables the physician to recommend *Nidāna Parivarjana*, or the avoidance of causative factors, as the primary line of treatment. By eliminating the root causes of disease, Ayurveda aims to restore balance and promote healing naturally, even without pharmacological intervention. This preventive approach underscores Ayurveda's emphasis on maintaining health rather than merely curing disease.
- **Personalized and Holistic Therapy:** Ayurveda recognizes that each individual is unique and therefore requires a personalized treatment plan. The identification of *Hetu* allows for individualized therapies based on a person's *Prakṛti* (constitution), lifestyle, and environment. This holistic approach considers not only the physical body but also mental and emotional factors in disease causation.
- **Foundation of Preventive Medicine:** By focusing on *Hetu*, Ayurveda emphasizes the importance of prevention in maintaining health. Avoiding causative factors such as improper diet, irregular routines, and environmental imbalances is considered the cornerstone of Ayurvedic preventive medicine.^{6,7}

4. Trividha Hetu: The Three Fundamental Causes

Ācārya Caraka and other classical authorities describe *Trividha Hetu* as the three universal causes responsible for all diseases. These are:

1. **Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga** (Improper Sensory Contact)
2. **Prajñāparādha** (Intellectual Error)
3. **Pariṇāma** (Transformation, or Time)

Each of these causes operates at a different level: sensory (*Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga*), cognitive (*Prajñāparādha*), and temporal (*Pariṇāma*). Together, they offer a comprehensive explanation for the origin of diseases in both the physical and mental realms.

4.1 Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga

This cause refers to improper, excessive, or deficient contact between the sense organs (*Indriyas*) and their respective objects (*Arthas*). In Ayurveda, health is maintained only when sensory experiences—such as sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—are in harmony with the body's constitution. Any imbalance in sensory engagement can lead to diseases.

4.2 Prajñāparādha

Prajñāparādha, or “offense against wisdom,” occurs when the intellect (*Dhi*), willpower (*Dhṛti*), and memory (*Smṛti*) are impaired. This leads individuals to engage in harmful behaviors knowingly, despite having knowledge of their detrimental effects. It highlights the importance of mental clarity and self-control in maintaining health.

4.3 Pariṇāma (Kāla)

Pariṇāma refers to the transformation or changes that occur over time. Unlike the other two causes, which are avoidable through conscious efforts, Pariṇāma is inevitable and operates through the passage of time. It includes seasonal variations (*Rtu Pariṇāma*), aging (*Jarā Pariṇāma*), circadian rhythms (*Ahorātra Pariṇāma*), and the cumulative effects of past actions (*Vipākaja Pariṇāma*).⁸

5. Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga

5.1 Conceptual Meaning

Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga refers to improper sensory interaction, which may involve excessive, inadequate, or distorted sensory contact with their objects. Sensory harmony is essential for maintaining balance within the body, and any deviation from this balance can lead to disease.

5.2 Types of Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga

- **Atiyoga** – Excessive sensory exposure (e.g., overstimulation from bright lights, loud noises, or intense flavors)
- **Ayoga (Hinayoga)** – Insufficient sensory engagement (e.g., lack of exposure to stimulating environments, poor nutrition, or inadequate mental engagement)
- **Mithyāyoga** – Misuse or distortion of sensory input (e.g., consuming incompatible foods or indulging in harmful sensory pleasures)

5.3 Role of Rasanendriya (Taste)

Among the five senses, *Rasanendriya* plays a pivotal role due to its direct influence on food intake, digestion (*Agni*), and overall metabolic processes. Improper use of taste, such as overeating, consuming incompatible foods, or eating in excess of certain tastes (e.g., excessive salt, sweet, or sour), can lead to *Agnimāndya* (weak digestive fire), formation of *Āma* (toxins), and chronic metabolic disorders.

5.4 Modern Relevance

In today's society, improper sensory engagement—such as digital overstimulation, unhealthy eating habits, and a sedentary lifestyle—exemplifies Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga. This leads to a rise in lifestyle disorders such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and psychosomatic illnesses. Ayurvedic principles highlight the importance of regulating sensory input for optimal health.^{9,10}

6. Prajñāparādha

6.1 Conceptual Meaning

Prajñāparādha is described as an intellectual failure, where one knowingly engages in harmful behaviors despite being aware of their adverse consequences. It arises from the impairment of *Dhi* (intellect), *Dhṛti* (self-control), and *Smṛti* (memory).

6.2 Pathophysiological Role

Prajñāparādha contributes to:

- Unwholesome diet (*Ahita Ahāra*)
- Unhealthy lifestyle choices (*Ahita Vihāra*)
- Emotional disturbances (e.g., anger, fear, and greed)

These behaviors provoke doshic imbalances, impair *Agni*, and trigger disease progression.

6.3 Psychosomatic Significance

Prajñāparādha has a profound impact on mental health, contributing to psychosomatic disorders. In modern psychology, similar patterns of impaired decision-making, poor impulse control, and stress are recognized as significant risk factors for disease.¹¹

7. Pariṇāma (Kāla)

7.1 Conceptual Meaning

Pariṇāma refers to the inevitable transformations that occur over time. In Ayurveda, time is recognized as an unavoidable factor influencing all physiological processes. Aging, seasonal variations, and circadian rhythms all affect the balance of the *Doṣas* and contribute to disease.

7.2 Dimensions of Pariṇāma

- **Rtu Pariṇāma** – Seasonal changes and their impact on *Doṣa* balance
- **Jarā Pariṇāma** – Aging and the decline of bodily functions
- **Ahorātra Pariṇāma** – Diurnal rhythms and their effects on metabolism

- **Vipākaja Pariṇāma** – Delayed effects of past actions and their cumulative impact on health

7.3 Clinical Relevance

Pariṇāma plays a central role in chronic and degenerative diseases (*Kālaja Vyādhi*). Understanding the impact of time helps in mitigating age-related conditions through *Dinacaryā* (daily regimen), *Ṛtucaryā* (seasonal regimen), and *Rasāyana* (rejuvenation) therapies.^{12,13}

8. Interrelationship Among Trividha Hetu

The three Hetus operate synergistically, rather than independently:

- *Prajñāparādha* initiates faulty behavior
- *Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga* provokes doshic imbalances
- *Pariṇāma* influences the timing, progression, and chronicity of disease

Together, these factors destabilize the equilibrium of the *Doṣas*, *Dhātus*, and *Mala*, explaining the multifactorial nature of disease. The interrelationship underscores the complexity of disease causation and the necessity of addressing multiple layers of causality in Ayurvedic treatment.^{14,15}

9. Preventive and Therapeutic Implications

Understanding *Trividha Hetu* offers several practical applications in both prevention and treatment:

- **Nidāna Parivarjana**: Avoidance of causative factors through lifestyle modification
- **Behavioral Counseling**: Addressing cognitive and sensory imbalances
- **Dietary Discipline**: Regulating food intake and sensory engagement
- **Time-appropriate Interventions**: Adapting to seasonal and daily rhythms

This integrated approach bridges preventive medicine, personalized lifestyle management, and holistic healing, emphasizing the importance of early intervention and balanced living.^{16,17}

10. Discussion

Trividha Hetu, a central concept in Ayurvedic pathology, offers a profound understanding of disease causation. It is not simply a diagnostic tool but a comprehensive framework that reflects the holistic approach of Ayurveda. By integrating mind, senses, behavior, environment, and time, *Trividha Hetu* provides a model for understanding how diseases arise from both internal and external factors. This holistic approach is what sets Ayurveda apart from modern biomedical systems that often focus on isolated symptoms or biological dysfunctions without considering the interconnectedness of body and mind.¹⁸

Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga—the improper contact between the sense organs and their objects—emphasizes the role of sensory engagement in maintaining health. In modern times, this concept finds strong relevance in addressing the impact of over-stimulation (e.g., from technology or sensory overload) and under-stimulation (e.g., sensory deprivation or unhealthy lifestyle). Today, with the advent of digital devices and sedentary lifestyles, *Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga* manifests in various psychosomatic disorders such as digital eye strain, sleep disorders, and stress-related illnesses. These modern conditions align closely with the Ayurvedic understanding of *sensory imbalance*, further validating its applicability to contemporary health concerns.^{19,20}

Prajñāparādha, or *intellectual error*, speaks to the modern struggles of cognitive dissonance, poor decision-making, and behavioral risk factors. With increased awareness about lifestyle diseases like obesity, diabetes, and heart conditions, the failure to act upon known health information exemplifies *Prajñāparādha*. Behavioral patterns that perpetuate poor health, despite knowing better, underscore the importance of *intellectual discipline* in preventing disease. These behaviors often have psychosomatic ramifications, leading to chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and further physical diseases. *Prajñāparādha* provides a lens to understand why individuals may knowingly engage in harmful habits, and highlights the need for behavioral interventions that address cognitive and emotional health.^{21,22}

Pariṇāma (Kāla), the concept of transformation due to time, is foundational in understanding age-related degeneration and seasonal imbalances in Ayurveda. In the modern world, chronic diseases such as osteoarthritis, neurodegenerative disorders, and metabolic syndromes often emerge with aging, which is a direct reflection of the *Pariṇāma* concept. The modern understanding of aging, circadian rhythms, and seasonal variations in health mirrors the ancient Ayurvedic focus on time's role in disease causation. Recognizing that time is an unavoidable factor influencing disease progression can help both individuals and healthcare providers better manage chronic conditions by tailoring interventions to the rhythm of the body.^{23,24}

The interrelationship among these three Hetus creates a dynamic and multifactorial model of disease. *Prajñāparādha* leads to poor lifestyle choices, which are exacerbated by *Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga*, and the passage of time (*Pariṇāma*) then magnifies the consequences of these imbalances. This integrated understanding challenges the modern medical practice to consider both psychological and environmental factors in disease prevention, offering a comprehensive framework for approaching health.

Furthermore, this triadic relationship underscores the importance of preventive medicine. By addressing the root causes—whether through behavioral modifications (correcting *Prajñāparādha*), regulating sensory engagement (correcting *Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṃyoga*), or adapting to temporal changes (adhering to *Pariṇāma* guidelines)—

individuals can avoid the onset of diseases, or at least mitigate their severity. Ayurveda's focus on *Nidāna Parivarjana* (elimination of causes) offers an invaluable contribution to contemporary healthcare practices by emphasizing prevention rather than treatment.²⁵

11. Conclusion

The concept of *Trividha Hetu* in Ayurveda offers a comprehensive and integrative model for understanding the causation of diseases. By incorporating the interconnection between sensory behavior, cognitive processes, and the influence of time, this Ayurvedic framework transcends the limitations of symptom-based medical models. The three fundamental causes—*Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṁyoga*, *Prajñāparādha*, and *Pariṇāma*—interact synergistically, contributing to the origin, progression, and chronicity of both physical and mental disorders.

The relevance of *Trividha Hetu* extends beyond traditional Ayurvedic practices into the realm of modern medicine. The rise of lifestyle-related diseases, psychosomatic conditions, and chronic degenerative illnesses in today's society highlights the importance of addressing the root causes of disease. Sensory overload, poor dietary habits, intellectual error, and failure to adapt to the natural rhythms of time all contribute to the increasing prevalence of these health issues. *Asatmya-Indriyārtha Saṁyoga* reminds us of the importance of regulating sensory experiences to maintain health. *Prajñāparādha* draws attention to the role of cognition and behavior in disease prevention. *Pariṇāma* emphasizes the inevitable passage of time and its impact on health, urging us to adapt our routines according to the changing seasons, aging, and daily rhythms.

In conclusion, Ayurveda's *Trividha Hetu* offers a holistic, multifaceted approach to disease causation that is deeply relevant in the context of modern health challenges. Recognizing and correcting these fundamental causes can not only prevent disease but also promote optimal health and well-being. As Ayurveda continues to gain global recognition, the principles of *Trividha Hetu* provide a timeless and universal framework for advancing healthcare and fostering long-term wellness. By integrating these ancient insights with modern practices, we can move towards a more balanced, personalized, and preventive approach to healthcare that addresses the root causes of illness rather than merely treating symptoms.

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