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Prajnaparadha: The Root Cause of Disease Manifestation

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Abstract

Prajnaparadha (intellectual blasphemy or failure of wisdom) is regarded in Ayurveda as one of the three principal causes of disease, alongside *Asatmya Indriyarthasamyoga* (improper utilization of sensory organs) and *Pariama (Kala)* (effects of time). Among these, Acharya Charaka considers *Prajnaparadha* to be the most significant etiological factor because it originates from the impairment of *Dhi* (intellect), *Dhriti* (self-control), and *Smrti* (memory), leading individuals to knowingly engage in unhealthy physical, verbal, and mental actions. Such repeated behavioural errors disturb the equilibrium of *Doshas*, impair *Agni*, promote *Ama* formation, and ultimately manifest as disease. Contemporary medicine similarly recognizes that poor decision-making, maladaptive behaviours, chronic psychological stress, addictions, unhealthy dietary practices, physical inactivity, and emotional dysregulation contribute substantially to the burden of non-communicable and psychosomatic diseases. Thus, the Ayurvedic concept of *Prajnaparadha* closely parallels modern behavioural medicine and cognitive science. This review critically examines the classical understanding of *Prajnaparadha*, its role in disease manifestation, and its contemporary relevance by integrating Ayurvedic principles with current evidence from psychology, behavioural neuroscience, and lifestyle medicine. Such an integrative perspective highlights the importance of behavioural modification and preventive healthcare in achieving holistic well-being.

Keywords: *Prajnaparadha, Ayurveda, Dhi, Dhriti, Smrti, Behavioural Medicine, Lifestyle Disorders.*

Introduction

Health, according to Ayurveda, is not merely the absence of disease but a dynamic state of equilibrium encompassing the body, mind, senses, and soul. Acharya Sushruta defines a healthy individual as one whose *Doshas*, *Agni*, *Dhatus*, and *Malas* remain in a state of physiological balance and who possesses a cheerful mind, properly functioning senses, and spiritual well-being. This comprehensive definition reflects the preventive and holistic philosophy of Ayurveda, emphasizing that maintenance of health is as important as the treatment of disease.

Unlike many contemporary medical systems that focus primarily on disease management, Ayurveda gives equal importance to identifying and eliminating the root causes responsible for disease manifestation. Acharya Charaka describes three fundamental etiological factors responsible for the origin of all diseases:

Asatmya Indriyarthasamyoga (improper contact of the senses with their objects),

Prajnaparadha (intellectual error or failure of wisdom), and

Parinama (Kala) (the effects of time and seasonal variations). Among these, *Prajnaparadha* occupies a unique position because it directly influences human behaviour and often serves as the initiating factor for the other two causes. An

individual endowed with sound intellect naturally avoids harmful sensory indulgence and adapts appropriately to seasonal changes. Conversely, impairment of wisdom predisposes individuals to repeated unhealthy choices, ultimately disturbing physiological homeostasis and precipitating disease.

The term *Prajnaparadha* is derived from two Sanskrit words: *Prajna*, meaning higher intellect or discriminative wisdom, and *Aparadha*, meaning transgression or offence. Thus, *Prajnaparadha* refers to actions performed against one's better judgment despite possessing adequate knowledge of right and wrong. It is essentially the failure to utilize one's intellect appropriately in making healthy decisions. Acharya Charaka attributes this failure to disturbances in the coordinated functioning of three higher mental faculties—*Dhi* (intellectual discrimination), *Dhriti* (self-restraint or willpower), and *Smriti* (memory or recollection of past experiences). When these faculties are impaired, individuals lose the ability to distinguish beneficial from harmful actions, fail to exercise self-control, and neglect previously acquired knowledge, resulting in repeated behavioural mistakes.

The consequences of *Prajnaparadha* extend far beyond individual actions. Repeated indulgence in improper dietary habits (*Ahita Ahara*), unhealthy lifestyle practices (*Ahita*

Vihara), suppression or forcible initiation of natural urges (*Vega Dharana* and *Vega Udirana*), excessive psychological stress, anger, greed, jealousy, addiction, and sleep disturbances ultimately lead to aggravation of the *Doshas*, impairment of *Agni*, formation of *Ama*, and disruption of normal physiological processes. Classical Ayurvedic texts therefore recognize *Prajnaparadha* as the behavioural foundation underlying numerous physical, psychological, and psychosomatic disorders.

Modern biomedical research increasingly supports this behavioural perspective. Many of today's major health challenges—including obesity, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, substance abuse, depression, anxiety disorders, and certain malignancies—are strongly associated with unhealthy lifestyle choices rather than infectious causes alone. Individuals often continue behaviours such as tobacco consumption, alcohol misuse, consumption of processed foods, physical inactivity, chronic sleep deprivation, and unmanaged stress despite being fully aware of their harmful consequences. This paradox reflects impairment in judgement, self-control, and behavioural regulation, concepts that closely resemble the Ayurvedic description of *Prajnaparadha*.

Advances in behavioural medicine, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience have demonstrated that decision-making is governed by executive functions involving attention, memory, emotional regulation, impulse control, and cognitive flexibility. Dysfunction of these processes predisposes individuals to maladaptive behaviours and chronic disease. The Ayurvedic concepts of *Dhi*, *Dhriti*, and *Smriti* exhibit remarkable conceptual parallels with these higher cognitive functions, illustrating the enduring relevance of classical Ayurvedic psychology.

Furthermore, contemporary public health strategies increasingly emphasize behavioural modification, patient education, stress management, mindfulness, and lifestyle counselling as essential components of disease prevention. Ayurveda has advocated these principles for centuries through concepts such as *Sadvritta*, *Achara Rasayana*, *Dinacharya*, *Ritucharya*, and *Sattvavajaya Chikitsa*, all of which aim to strengthen intellect, improve self-regulation, and cultivate healthy behavioural patterns.

In the era of rapidly increasing lifestyle disorders and psychosomatic diseases, understanding *Prajnaparadha* from both classical and modern perspectives offers valuable insights into preventive healthcare. By recognizing behavioural errors as fundamental contributors to disease, healthcare professionals can develop more comprehensive strategies that address not only biological abnormalities but also cognitive and behavioural determinants of health.

Objectives

To critically review the concept of *Prajnaparadha* as described in classical Ayurvedic literature and to explore its role in the manifestation of diseases by correlating traditional concepts with contemporary evidence from behavioural medicine, psychology, neuroscience, and lifestyle health sciences.

Materials and Methods

The present study is a narrative review based on an extensive survey of classical Ayurvedic literature and contemporary scientific publications. References pertaining to *Prajnaparadha*, *Dhi*, *Dhriti*, *Smriti*, and disease pathogenesis were collected from *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, and

Ashtanga Hridaya along with their authoritative commentaries. Modern literature concerning behavioural medicine, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, psychosomatic disorders, and lifestyle diseases was retrieved from peer-reviewed articles indexed in PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and other scientific databases. Relevant review articles, observational studies, clinical studies, and consensus guidelines were critically evaluated. The collected literature was systematically categorized under thematic headings and interpreted by integrating classical Ayurvedic concepts with current scientific understanding to explore the role of *Prajnaparadha* in disease manifestation.

Review of Literature

Concept of *Prajnaparadha* in Ayurveda

Among the numerous contributions of Ayurveda to preventive medicine, the concept of *Prajnaparadha* occupies a distinctive place. Ayurveda explains that disease does not arise merely from external pathogens or environmental influences but also from repeated errors in human behaviour resulting from impaired intellect. Acharya *Charaka* identifies *Prajnaparadha*, *Asatmya Indriyarth Samyoga*, and *Parinama (Kala)* as the three principal causes of all diseases. While sensory misuse and seasonal variations contribute to pathology, *Prajnaparadha* is regarded as the fundamental behavioural cause because it predisposes an individual to engage repeatedly in harmful physical, verbal, and mental activities.

The term *Prajnaparadha* literally means "transgression against wisdom." It refers to the inability to distinguish beneficial from harmful actions despite possessing the knowledge required to make appropriate decisions. In practical terms, it represents knowingly performing actions that are detrimental to health or repeatedly failing to follow healthy practices. Ayurveda considers such behavioural deviations to be the starting point of disease manifestation.

Classical Definition

Acharya *Charaka* describes *Prajnaparadha* as the consequence of impairment of the three higher mental faculties:

- *Dhi* (intellect)
- *Dhriti* (self-restraint)
- *Smriti* (memory)

When these faculties function harmoniously, an individual makes rational decisions, controls impulses, and remembers previous experiences while selecting appropriate actions. Disturbance of any one of these faculties results in inappropriate judgement and unhealthy behaviour, ultimately leading to disease.

Acharya *Sushruta* similarly recognizes that improper conduct resulting from disturbed intellect contributes to *Dosha* vitiation and disease. *Vagbhata* also emphasizes that preservation of mental discipline and righteous conduct is indispensable for maintaining health and preventing disease.

Components of *Prajnaparadha*

- *Dhi (Intellect)*

Dhi represents the faculty of discrimination and analytical thinking. It enables an individual to distinguish right from wrong, beneficial from harmful, and wholesome from unwholesome. Proper functioning of *Dhi* allows a person to assess situations logically and choose behaviours that promote health.

Impairment of *Dhi* results in:

- Faulty judgement
- Poor decision-making
- Inability to recognize harmful habits
- Irrational behaviour

For example, despite understanding the harmful effects of excessive sugar consumption, an individual may continue unhealthy eating habits due to impaired discrimination.

• *Dhṛti* (Self-Control)

Dhṛti refers to determination, perseverance, emotional stability, and the ability to exercise self-control over sensory desires and impulsive behaviour. It prevents individuals from engaging in actions known to be harmful.

A person with strong *Dhṛti* can resist temptations, regulate emotions, and maintain healthy habits even under adverse circumstances.

Loss of *Dhṛti* manifests as:

- Lack of self-discipline
- Impulsive behaviour
- Addictions
- Emotional instability
- Inability to follow medical advice

Thus, *Dhṛti* serves as an important behavioural regulator that protects health.

• *Smṛiti* (Memory)

Smṛiti denotes memory, recollection, and the ability to learn from previous experiences. It enables individuals to remember beneficial practices, avoid past mistakes, and apply acquired knowledge appropriately.

Disturbance of *Smṛiti* leads to:

- Forgetting healthy practices
- Repetition of harmful behaviours
- Inability to apply previous learning
- Poor adherence to treatment

Together, *Dhi*, *Dhṛti*, and *Smṛiti* form the psychological foundation of healthy behaviour. Impairment of these faculties culminates in *Prajnaparadha*.

Types of *Prajnaparadha*

Classical Ayurvedic literature indicates that *Prajnaparadha* may occur through three principal modes of human activity:

1. Physical (*Kayika*)

Improper bodily actions such as:

- Unhealthy diet
- Sedentary lifestyle
- Suppression of natural urges
- Excessive exercise
- Sleep deprivation
- Substance abuse

These actions directly disturb *Dosha* balance and impair *Agni*.

2. Verbal (*Vachika*)

Speech-related misconduct including:

- Lying
- Harsh speech

- Excessive talking
- Abusive language
- Creating interpersonal conflict

Such behaviours disturb mental equilibrium and social harmony.

3. Mental (*Manasika*)

Mental errors include:

- Anger
- Greed
- Jealousy
- Fear
- Attachment
- Arrogance
- Excessive anxiety
- Negative thinking

These emotional disturbances aggravate primarily *Rajas* and *Tamas*, leading to psychosomatic disorders.

Causes of *Prajnaparadha*

Ayurveda attributes *Prajnaparadha* to disturbances in mental balance resulting from domination of *Rajas* and *Tamas* over *Sattva*.

Common causative factors include:

- *Kama* (excessive desire)
- *Krodha* (anger)
- *Lobha* (greed)
- *Moha* (attachment)
- *Mada* (pride)
- *Matsarya* (jealousy)
- *Bhaya* (fear)

Chinta (Excessive Worry)

Persistent indulgence in these emotional states impairs rational thinking, weakens self-control, and promotes unhealthy behaviour.

Role of *Prajnaparadha* in Disease Manifestation

Ayurveda describes a sequential mechanism through which *Prajnaparadha* contributes to disease development. Initially, impairment of *Dhi*, *Dhṛti*, and *Smṛiti* causes behavioural deviations. Individuals knowingly adopt improper dietary habits (*Ahita Ahara*), unhealthy lifestyle practices (*Ahita Vihara*), suppression of natural urges (*Vega Dharana*), excessive sensory indulgence, and emotional instability. These repeated actions gradually aggravate one or more *Doshas* depending upon the individual's constitution and environmental influences.

Table 1: Classical Description of *Prajnaparadha*

Classical Concept	Ayurvedic Description	Clinical Implication
<i>Dhi</i>	Proper perception and discrimination	Correct health decisions
<i>Dhṛiti</i>	Self-restraint and willpower	Behavioural regulation
<i>Smṛiti</i>	Memory and recollection	Learning from previous experience
<i>Prajnaparadha</i>	Transgression of wisdom	Behavioural cause of disease

Persistent *Dosha* vitiation impairs Agni, resulting in incomplete digestion and metabolism. Consequently, *Ama*, the toxic by-product of impaired digestion, is generated. *Ama* obstructs body channels (*Srotorodha*), interferes with tissue nutrition, weakens immunity, and initiates pathological changes throughout the body. Progressive *Dosha–Dushya* interaction eventually culminates in clinical disease. Thus, *Prajnaparadha* functions as the behavioural trigger initiating the cascade from faulty conduct to *Dosha* imbalance, *Agnimandya*, *Ama* formation, and disease manifestation. This conceptual framework underscores the central importance of behavioural regulation in Ayurvedic preventive medicine.

Pathogenesis of Disease due to *Prajnaparadha*



Contemporary behavioural medicine, cognitive neuroscience, and public health similarly recognize that maladaptive decision-making, chronic stress, addictions, unhealthy dietary habits, physical inactivity, and poor emotional regulation underlie the global epidemic of non-communicable diseases. This remarkable convergence demonstrates the *enduring* scientific relevance of the Ayurvedic concept of *Prajnaparadha*. Strengthening intellect through *Sadvritta*, *Acharya Rasyana*, *Dinacharya*, *Rtucharya*, *Yoga*, and *Sattvavajaya Chikitsa* offers a comprehensive preventive strategy aimed at correcting behavioural errors before disease develops. Integrating these time-tested Ayurvedic principles with contemporary behavioural interventions and lifestyle medicine may provide an effective framework for reducing the burden of chronic diseases and advancing holistic, patient-centred healthcare.

धीधृतिस्मृतिविभ्रष्टः कर्म यत् कुरुतेऽशुभम् ।
प्रज्ञापराधं तं विद्यात् सर्वदोषप्रकोपनम् ॥

When a person's intellect (*Dhi*), self-restraint (*Dhriti*), and memory (*Smriti*) are impaired, they perform unwholesome actions. This is known as *Prajnaparadha*, which aggravates all the *Doshas*.

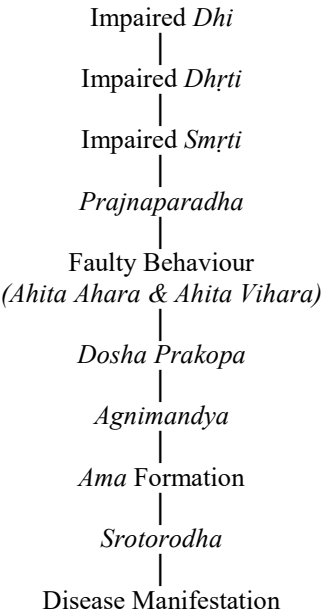
Table 2: Correlation with Modern Behavioural Science

Ayurvedic Concept	Modern Correlation	Clinical Example
<i>Dhi</i>	Executive function	Judgement and planning
<i>Dhriti</i>	Impulse control	Resisting addictions
<i>Smriti</i>	Memory and learning	Treatment adherence
<i>Prajnaparadha</i>	Maladaptive behaviour	Smoking despite knowing the risk
<i>Sattvavajaya</i>	Cognitive behavioural therapy and mindfulness	Behaviour modification

Table 3: Role of *Prajnaparadha* in Disease Manifestation

Behavioural Error	Ayurvedic Pathogenesis	Possible Modern Disease
Unhealthy diet	<i>Agnimandya</i> → <i>Ama</i>	Obesity, diabetes
Physical inactivity	Kapha aggravation	Metabolic syndrome
Chronic stress	Vata–Pitta aggravation	Anxiety, hypertension
Smoking	<i>Dosha</i> vitiation and <i>Dhatu</i> injury	COPD, lung cancer
Alcohol misuse	<i>Agni</i> impairment	Liver disease
Sleep deprivation	Vata aggravation	Depression, cardiovascular disease

Flow Chart Showing-Behavioural Pathogenesis



Flow Chart Showing-Integration with Modern Behavioural Medicine



Conclusion

Prajnapardha represents one of the most profound and clinically relevant concepts in Ayurveda, emphasizing that the origins of many diseases lie in repeated behavioural and cognitive errors rather than solely in external pathogenic factors. Impairment of *Dhi*, *Dhriti*, and *Smriti* disrupts rational judgement, weakens self-control, and promotes unhealthy physical, verbal, and mental actions. These behavioural deviations initiate a cascade of pathological events characterized by *Dosha* aggravation, *Agnimandya*, *Ama* formation, and eventual disease manifestation.

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