



**KRIYA KALA IN AYURVEDA: A COMPREHENSIVE EXPLORATION OF DISEASE
PATHOGENESIS AND CLINICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

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ABSTRACT

Kriya Kala is a fundamental concept in Ayurveda that describes the sequential stages of disease development. It provides a systematic understanding of how dosha imbalance progresses from subtle physiological disturbance to fully manifested pathology and ultimately to complications. This staged approach offers a unique advantage for early diagnosis, prevention, and stage-wise therapeutic intervention. The present article elaborates the concept of Shat Kriya Kala (six stages of disease), its pathological basis, clinical features, and its significance in diagnosis, prognosis, and management.

KEYWORDS: *Kriya Kala, Shat Kriya Kala, Dosha, Pathogenesis, Ayurveda, Disease progression, Purvarupa, Dosha-Dushya Sammurchhana.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda, one of the world's oldest and most comprehensive systems of medicine, places paramount importance on the preservation of health and the prevention of disease. Central to its philosophy is the understanding that disease does not arise abruptly but evolves through identifiable, progressive stages that offer distinct windows for clinical intervention.

The concept of Kriya Kala embodies this preventive and interventional philosophy. The term is derived from two Sanskrit words—Kriya (therapeutic action or remedy) and Kala (time or stage)—and collectively denotes “the appropriate time for action.” This concept enables the Ayurvedic physician to identify the precise moment at which specific treatment will be most effective.

According to classical Ayurvedic texts, health (Swastha) is defined as the equilibrium of the three doshas (Vata, Pitta, and Kapha), the seven dhatus (body tissues), and the three malas (waste products), accompanied by clarity of the senses, mind, and soul.^[1,2] Disease (Vyadhi) arises when this equilibrium is disturbed. Importantly, Maharishi Sushruta systematically described the

progression of this disturbance into six distinct stages, collectively known as Shat Kriya Kala, providing an unparalleled framework for understanding disease development and determining the optimal timing of therapeutic intervention.^[1]

2. Conceptual Basis of Disease Formation

The three doshas—Vata, Pitta, and Kapha—govern all physiological and psychological functions. Any quantitative or qualitative disturbance in their equilibrium (Dosha Vaishmya) initiates a pathological process. Several etiological factors contribute to this disturbance.

- Asatmya Indriyarthā Samyoga – Improper use of sense organs (excessive, deficient, or perverted)
- Prajnaparadha – Intellectual error; acting against the dictates of reason and conscience
- Parinama (Ritucharya) – Seasonal variations causing inappropriate dosha fluctuations
- Mithya Ahara-Vihara – Improper diet and lifestyle
- Kala – Age, diurnal, and seasonal influences on dosha balance

Disease progression follows a definite sequence beginning with subtle accumulation and, if unchecked, culminating in complications or chronicity. The Doshadushya Sammurchhana (interaction between aggravated doshas and susceptible tissues/channels) forms the physiological core of this pathogenesis.^[2,3]

3. Shat Kriya Kala: Six Stages of Disease Development

Table 1 provides a concise overview of all six stages, followed by a detailed discussion of each stage.

Table 1: Overview of Shat Kriya Kala.

Stage No.	Kriya Kala	Meaning	Site of Involvement	Key Clinical Features	Clinical Significance
1	Sanchaya	Accumulation	Natural sites of doshas	Heaviness, fullness, lethargy, aversion to similar gunas	Completely reversible; preventive intervention
2	Prakopa	Aggravation	Original dosha sites	Abdominal pain, burning, thirst, nausea, aversion to food	Transition from physiological to pathological
3	Prasara	Spread	Throughout body via srotas	Gurgling sounds, burning, indigestion, vomiting, malaise	Systemic involvement; stronger intervention needed
4	Sthana Samshraya	Localization	Specific tissues (dushyas)	Purvarupa (prodromal symptoms), site-specific changes	Early diagnostic clues before full manifestation
5	Vyakti	Manifestation	Target organ/tissue	Clear, specific signs and symptoms; disease identifiable	Accurate diagnosis; disease-specific treatment
6	Bheda	Complication/Chronicity	Systemic/structural	Chronic disease, structural changes, reduced curability	Poor prognosis; palliative management often required

3.1 Sanchaya (Stage of Accumulation)

—'चयो वृद्धिः स्वधाम्नेव' (अ.ह.सू. १२/२२)

Sanchaya represents the initial stage of disease development, wherein doshas begin to accumulate quantitatively in their natural anatomical sites (Vata in the colon/pelvic region, Pitta in the small intestine/liver, and Kapha in the stomach/lungs) due to prolonged exposure to causative factors.^[1]

Pathophysiology

The accumulation remains localized and does not yet produce overt disease. The body signals imbalance through subtle compensatory responses—notably, a natural aversion to similar qualities (Guna) and a desire for opposite qualities, which represents the body's intrinsic attempt at self-correction.

Clinical Features

- Heaviness and fullness in the abdomen or relevant body region.
- Mild digestive impairment and sluggish Agni (digestive fire).
- General lethargy and physical inertia.
- Aversion to substances with similar gunas (e.g., heaviness averse to heavy foods).
- Desire for opposite qualities (e.g., lightness, warmth).

Clinical Significance

This stage is entirely reversible. Timely intervention—even through simple dietary modifications and lifestyle correction—can prevent any further progression. This stage represents the ideal opportunity for primary prevention.^[18,19]

3.2 Prakopa (Stage of Aggravation)

'कोपस्तूनमार्गगामिता' (अ.ह.सू. १२/२३)

Aggravation implies movement towards abnormal channels

In Prakopa, the accumulated doshas become qualitatively aggravated and lose their physiological stability, preparing for outward movement.^[1,4]

Pathophysiology

The doshas increase both in quantity and intensity. They begin to exert pressure on the boundaries of their natural sites, preparing for dissemination into adjacent channels and tissues. This marks the critical transition from physiological imbalance to nascent pathological activity.

Clinical Features

- Koshtha Toda – Abdominal pain and colicky discomfort
- Increased Vata movement causing gaseous distension
- Paridaha – Burning sensations
- Increased thirst and sour belching (Amlodgara)
- Hallasa – Nausea and malaise

- Aversion to food and anorexia

Clinical Significance

Intervention at this stage can still prevent systemic spread. Shodhana preparation and targeted dietary measures are highly effective. Failure to act here allows progression to systemic involvement.^[2,5]

3.3 Prasara (Stage of Spread)

एतेन प्रकोपभेद एव प्रसरः। (च.सू. २१/२९)

Prasara denotes dissemination—the escape and spreading of aggravated doshas from their original sites throughout the body via the srotas (micro-channels of the body).^[1]

Pathophysiology

The aggravated doshas, driven primarily by Vata (the principle governing movement), overflow their natural boundaries and travel through the body's channel systems. A classical analogy captures this perfectly: just as overheated ghee spills over its vessel and spreads in all directions, so too do aggravated doshas disseminate when their containment is exceeded.^[4,8]

Clinical Features

- Vimarga Gamana – Movement through abnormal bodily channels
- Atopa – Gurgling sounds in the abdomen
- Osha, Chosha, Paridaha – Various forms of burning sensation
- Avipaka – Indigestion and impaired digestion
- Aruchi – Loss of appetite
- Angasada – General malaise and fatigue
- Chhardi – Vomiting

Clinical Significance

Systemic involvement has begun, but the disease has not yet localized. Intensive Shodhana (purification) therapies such as Panchakarma are most effective at this stage. Early systemic treatment can still achieve complete resolution.^[3,9]

3.4 Sthana Samshraya (Stage of Localization)

स्थान संश्रय इति दोषदूष्यस्य संश्रयः। (च.सू.सू. २१/३९)

The localization of doshas and dushyas together In Sthana Samshraya, the spreading doshas take up residence in specific, vulnerable tissues or organs (dushyas) due to structural or functional weakness in the srotas at those sites.^[1]

Pathophysiology

The interaction that occurs when doshas settle into susceptible tissues is called Dosha-Dushya Sannimurchhana—a pivotal event in Ayurvedic pathogenesis. The classical verse describes this eloquently.

कुपितानां हि दोषाणां शरीरे परिधावताम्।

यत्र संगः ख वैगुण्याद् व्याधिस्तत्रोपजायते ॥ (सु.सू. २४/१३)

("Of the aggravated doshas moving throughout the body, where obstruction occurs due to deficiency of the channel, disease is born at that site.")^[1]

Clinical Features and Disease Examples

- Abdomen: Agnimandya (impaired digestion), Atisara (diarrhoea)
- Urinary tract: Prameha (urinary/metabolic disorders including diabetes)
- Skin and subcutaneous tissue: Kushtha (skin diseases)
- Joints and blood: Vatarakta (gout/arthritis)
- Prodromal (Purvarupa) symptoms appear—vague, site-specific warning signs that precede full disease manifestation

Clinical Significance

This stage provides the earliest diagnostic clues specific to the developing disease. Recognition of Purvarupa (prodromal symptoms) allows targeted intervention before the disease fully manifests, making this stage especially valuable for secondary prevention.^[2,19]

3.5 Vyakti (Stage of Manifestation)

'व्याधेः प्रत्यक्तं रूपं व्यक्तितः' (सु.सू. २१/३४ पर डल्हण)

‘The full expression of the disease is Vyakti

Vyakti represents the complete expression of disease, characterized by fully established dosha-dushya interaction and clear, specific clinical presentation.^[1]

Pathophysiology

The pathological interaction between doshas and dushyas is now complete, producing the characteristic signs and symptoms of a recognizable disease entity. The disease is no longer a prodromal possibility but a clinical reality.

Clinical Features

- Fever (Jwara) in febrile conditions.
- Diarrhoea in Atisara.
- Jaundice in Kamala (liver disease).
- Polyuria and glycosuria in Prameha.
- Specific cutaneous lesions in Kushtha.

Clinical Significance

Accurate diagnosis is now possible and treatment becomes disease-specific. The combination of Nidana (aetiology), Purvarupa (prodrome), Rupa (clinical features), Upashaya (therapeutic test), and Samprapti (pathogenesis) enables comprehensive disease assessment (Nidana Panchaka).^[2,11]

3.6 Bheda (Stage of Complication or Chronicity)

अत ऊर्ध्वमेतेषामवदीर्णानां व्रणभावमापन्नानां षष्ठः

क्रियाकालः। (सु.सू. २१/३७)

Bheda is the terminal stage of Shat Kriya Kala, characterized by chronicity, structural damage, and the development of complications.^[1]

Pathophysiology

Prolonged persistence of the disease leads to irreversible tissue damage, structural changes, and reduced capacity for self-repair. The disease may now serve as a causative factor for secondary conditions—a phenomenon known as Nidanarthakara Roga.

Clinical Features

- Chronic or frequently relapsing disease.
- Structural and morphological changes in tissues.
- Disease classified as Vataja, Pittaja, Kaphaja, or Sannipatika based on dominant dosha.
- Significantly reduced curability (Krichrasadhya or Asadhya).
- Emergence of secondary complications and comorbidities.

Clinical Significance

Prognosis is poor and management is difficult, often palliative. The goal shifts from cure to quality of life, minimizing complications, and preventing further deterioration.^[3,19] This stage underscores the critical importance of early detection in all preceding stages.

4. Dosha-Specific Clinical Features Across Kriya Kala Stages

The clinical presentation at each stage varies depending on the dominant dosha involved. Table 2 summarizes the characteristic features of Vata, Pitta, and Kapha disturbances across the six stages.

Table 2: Dosha-Specific Clinical Features Across Shat Kriya Kala.

Stage	Vata Dosha Features	Pitta Dosha Features	Kapha Dosha Features
Sanchaya	Heaviness, fullness in abdomen; gas retention; lethargy	Heartburn, mild acidity, yellow discolouration of skin	Heaviness in chest, mild cough, excess salivation
Prakopa	Abdominal distension, colic pain, constipation	Burning sensation, fever, increased thirst	Nausea, excess mucus, loss of appetite
Prasara	Gurgling sounds, movement in abdomen, dryness	Burning throughout body, sweating, loose stools	Heaviness, pallor, excessive sleep, lethargy
Sthana Samshraya	Stiffness, pain at target site (e.g., joints)	Inflammation, redness at target site (e.g., liver)	Swelling, coldness at target site (e.g., lungs)
Vyakti	Vata disorders (e.g., paralysis, arthralgia)	Pitta disorders (e.g., jaundice, peptic ulcer)	Kapha disorders (e.g., diabetes, obesity)
Bheda	Degenerative changes, wasting, neurological damage	Organ failure, haemorrhagic conditions	Fibrosis, tumour formation, chronic inflammation

5. Comparative View: Charaka, Vagbhata, and Sushruta

The classical Ayurvedic authorities differ in their description of Kriya Kala stages, reflecting distinct philosophical emphases and clinical priorities. While

Charaka and Vagbhata describe a three-stage model focused on dosha equilibrium and natural resolution, Sushruta's six-stage model provides a more detailed framework for clinical application.^[1,2,3]

Table 3: Comparison of Kriya Kala Across Classical Ayurvedic Authorities.

Parameter	Charaka / Vagbhata	Sushruta
Stages Described	3 stages: Sanchaya, Prakopa, Prashama	6 stages: Sanchaya, Prakopa, Prasara, Sthana Samshraya, Vyakti, Bheda
Focus	Dosha equilibrium and natural remission (Prashama)	Progressive pathological development toward disease manifestation
Prashama Stage	Included as natural resolution stage	Not emphasized; focus is on disease progression
Clinical Application	Prevention and restoration of dosha balance	Comprehensive pathogenesis, diagnosis, and stage-wise management
Therapeutic Emphasis	Early intervention and Rasayana (rejuvenation)	Stage-specific treatments including Shodhana and Shamana
Relevance to Diagnosis	Indicates when doshas are self-limiting	Provides prodromal clues (Purvarupa) for early diagnosis

6. Clinical Significance and Applications

6.1 Early Diagnosis

The recognition of Purvarupa (prodromal symptoms) at Stage 4 (Sthana Samshraya) enables detection of disease

before it fully manifests. This advantage is unparalleled in contemporary clinical practice, where most diagnoses occur only at the Vyakti (Stage 5) equivalent.^[18,19]

6.2 Preventive Approach

Intervention at Sanchaya or Prakopa stages can completely prevent disease manifestation. The classical dictum illustrates this.

संचयेऽपहता दोषा लभन्ते नोत्तरा गतिम्।

ते त्वुत्तरासु गतिषु भवन्ति बलवत्तराः॥(सु.सू. २१/३७)

("Doshas eliminated at the Sanchaya stage do not progress further; those allowed to progress to later stages become increasingly powerful.")^[1]

6.3 Stage-Wise Treatment Planning

Kriya Kala provides a rational basis for determining the type, timing, and intensity of treatment at each stage. Table 4 summarizes the therapeutic principles applicable at each stage.

Table 4: Stage-Wise Treatment Principles in Kriya Kala.

Stage	Kriya Kala	Primary Treatment Principle	Specific Interventions
1	Sanchaya	Nidana Parivarjana (avoidance of causative factors); Dinacharya and Ritucharya	Mild lifestyle modifications; appropriate diet; Langhana (fasting) if needed
2	Prakopa	Nidana Parivarjana; Shodhana (purification) preparation; Deepana-Pachana (digestive stimulants)	Mild Shodhana; specific dietary restrictions; herbal formulations
3	Prasara	Shodhana Chikitsa (Panchakarma); Virechana (purgation) for Pitta; Basti for Vata	Intensive purification therapies; Rasayana to strengthen srotas
4	Sthana Samshraya	Targeted Shodhana; site-specific Shamana (palliative) therapies; Agni restoration	Disease-specific herbomineral formulations; Sroto-shodhana (channel purification)
5	Vyakti	Diagnosis-specific Shamana; Rasayana; Satvavajaya (psychotherapy where applicable)	Long-term herbal protocols; diet and lifestyle according to Prakriti and Vikriti
6	Bheda	Palliative Shamana; Vyaadhikshamatva (immunity) enhancement; management of complications	Nidanarthakara Roga management; supportive and symptomatic treatments

6.4 Prognosis Assessment

The staging of disease directly informs prognosis. Earlier stages (Sanchaya–Prasara) carry excellent prognosis with appropriate treatment; Sthana Samshraya and Vyakti offer good to fair prognosis; Bheda stage generally carries guarded to poor prognosis. This prognostic stratification enables realistic counselling and appropriate management planning.^[2,11]

6.5 Disease Interrelationship: Nidanarthakara Roga

Advanced stages of Kriya Kala can lead to Nidanarthakara Roga—conditions that themselves become causative factors for other diseases. This concept anticipates modern medicine's understanding of comorbidities and disease cascades, highlighting the systems-based thinking embedded in Ayurvedic pathology.^[3,19]

7. CONCLUSION

Kriya Kala represents one of the most sophisticated concepts in Ayurvedic pathology, providing a clinically actionable framework for understanding disease progression. By systematically describing the six stages from initial dosha accumulation to chronic complication, it enables physicians to intervene at the most effective point in the disease continuum.

The concept bridges the gap between fundamental Ayurvedic physiology and practical clinical application. It reinforces the primacy of prevention over cure—a principle that resonates strongly with contemporary

approaches to preventive medicine and chronic disease management.

Applied rigorously, Kriya Kala enables early detection through Purvarupa recognition, guides stage-specific therapeutic protocols, facilitates accurate prognosis, and ultimately improves patient outcomes. Its integration into modern clinical Ayurvedic practice remains as relevant and necessary today as it was in the era of Sushruta.

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