

Interpretation of Triguna Theory in Mental Health Management According to Ayurveda

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ABSTRACT

The exponential rise in global mental health disorders necessitates the exploration of holistic, multi-dimensional paradigms capable of offering personalized, preventative, and therapeutic interventions. Ayurveda, the ancient Indian science of life, proposes a sophisticated framework for understanding the human mind (Manas) through the construct of Triguna—the three fundamental psychological attributes: Sattva (purity, clarity, and balance), Rajas (dynamism, passion, and agitation), and Tamas (inertia, darkness, and ignorance). While Sattva represents the optimal state of psycho-emotional well-being, Rajas and Tamas are recognized as the mental pathogenic humors (Manasa Doshas) when misaligned or excessive. This paper provides a comprehensive interpretation of the Triguna theory within the context of contemporary mental health management. It investigates how these subtle bio-psychological attributes influence personality configuration (Manasa Prakriti), psychiatric etiopathogenesis (Manovikara), and clinical diagnosis. Furthermore, the paper elucidates the therapeutic apparatus of Ayurveda, focusing on Sattvavajaya Chikitsa (Ayurvedic Psychotherapy), Ahara (dietary modifications), Vihara (lifestyle practices, Yoga, and Pranayama), and Aushadha (nootropic Medhya Rasayana herbs). By bridging traditional ontological insights with modern psychological modalities, this review establishes a structural model for integrative psychiatry, offering scalable solutions for modern mental health challenges.

KEYWORDS: *Triguna, Sattva, Rajas, Tamas, Sattvavajaya Chikitsa, Manasa Prakriti, Mental Health Management, Ayurvedic Psychiatry.*

INTRODUCTION

Modern psychiatric paradigms, despite making significant strides in psychopharmacology and neuroimaging, often face systematic limitations in addressing the etiopathogenesis of mental disorders holistically. The prevailing biomedical model predominantly views mental illnesses through the lens of neurochemical imbalances, which frequently leads to symptomatic suppression rather than fundamental psycho-emotional rehabilitation. Consequently, there is an escalating global interest in complementary and alternative medical systems that conceptualize mental health as a dynamic equilibrium of cognitive, behavioral, environmental, and spiritual vectors. Ayurveda represents one of the oldest and most systematically documented paradigms of lifestyle medicine and holistic health.

In Ayurveda, health (Svastha) is not merely defined by the absence of somatic pathology but is conceptualized as an integrated state of equilibrium encompassing physical humors (Doshas), metabolic fires (Agni), tissue structures (Dhatus), waste elimination (Mala), and, crucially, a luminous state of the soul (Atma), sensory apparatus (Indriya), and mind (Manas). This is encapsulated in the classical definition from the Sushruta Samhita: "Samadosha Samagnishcha Samadhatu Malakriyah Prasannatmeindriya Manah Svastha Ityabhidhiyate." Thus, mental well-being is elevated to an essential prerequisite for holistic health.

To understand psychological operations, Ayurveda introduces the paradigm of Triguna, derived from the classical Samkhya school of Indian philosophy. The Triguna framework comprises three cosmic and psychological attributes: Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. These three forces permeate the macrocosm and manifest within the human psyche as distinct cognitive, affective, and behavioral tendencies. While Sattva is inherently non-pathological, representing psychological resilience, clarity, and virtue, Rajas and Tamas function as the Manasa Doshas—the fundamental psychic humors susceptible to imbalance. When corrupted by external stressors, poor lifestyle, and cognitive errors (Pragya-aparadha), Rajas and Tamas drive the pathogenesis of psychiatric conditions (Manovikara). This paper provides an extensive academic deconstruction of the Triguna theory, its clinical implications, and its systemic application in modern mental health management.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF TRIGUNA

The word 'Guna' translates literally to quality, attribute, or strand in a woven rope. In the ontological architecture of Samkhya-Ayurveda, the universe arises from the interaction of Purusha (pure consciousness) and Prakriti (primordial matter). Primordial matter is composed of three intrinsic qualities—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas—which remain in a state of perfect equilibrium prior to cosmic manifestation. Upon the disturbance of this equilibrium, creation begins, and every physical and mental structure inherits a unique combination of these three attributes. Therefore, the mind (Manas) is fundamentally shaped by the subtle shifts in these three forces.

Sattva represents the principle of light, truth, harmony, and cognitive clarity. It is characterized by qualities such as compassion, detachment, patience, wisdom, and an unyielding commitment to truth. It does not cause psychological disease because its essence is homeostasis and purity. Cultivating Sattva enhances mental resilience, enables cognitive flexibility, and promotes emotional intelligence. An individual with a dominant Sattva profile perceives reality without distorting projections, facilitating adaptive coping mechanisms.

Rajas embodies the principle of motion, energy, passion, and turbulence. It is the kinetic force required to initiate action, drive ambition, and execute cognitive tasks. However, when excessive, Rajas mutates into hyper-reactivity, anxiety, aggression, sensory greed, and emotional volatility. Rajas agitates the mind, drawing it outward toward endless sensory gratification, making it highly susceptible to frustration, jealousy, and pride.

Tamas characterizes the principle of inertia, darkness, opacity, and resistance. It is the force responsible for sleep, rest, grounding, and structural mass. When balanced, Tamas provides psychological stabilization and prevents sensory overload. When it becomes pathologic, it manifests as ignorance, delusion, lethargy, apathy, depression, and cognitive stagnation. Under a dominant Tamasic state, the mind loses its analytical capability, slipping into states of profound denial, confusion, or destructive attachment.

Structural Mapping of the Trigunas

The interaction, psychological manifestations, and physiological expressions of the three Gunas are organized systematically in Table 1.

Table: 1

Attribute (Guna)	Core Psychological Principle	Behavioral Manifestations (Balanced)	Psychopathological Expressions (Vitiated)
Sattva	Light, clarity, harmony, and balance.	Compassion, equanimity, truthfulness, self-control, sharp intellect, resilience, and wisdom.	Non-pathological; inherently fosters psychiatric immunity and psychological stability.
Rajas	Motion, dynamism, passion, and stimulus.	Ambition, drive, leadership, courage, focus, industry, and Goal-directed activity.	Anxiety, hyper-reactivity, insomnia, irritability, aggression, manic states, and narcissism.
Tamas	Inertia, stability, darkness, and mass.	Rest, deep sleep, emotional grounding, conservation of cognitive energy.	Depression, profound lethargy, stupor, chronic ignorance, cognitive delusion, and destructive addictions.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TYPOLOGIES: MANASA PRAKRITI

Ayurveda provides a unique contribution to differential psychology through the concept of Manasa Prakriti (mental constitution). While physical constitution (Deha Prakriti) is governed by the three physical humors (Vata, Pitta, Kapha), the psychological profile is determined by the distribution of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas at conception, which is further shaped by environmental, epigenetic, and developmental factors. Acharya Charaka, in the Sharira Sthana of Charaka Samhita, classifies human psychological profiles into sixteen distinct typologies: seven Sattvika, six Rajasika, and three Tamasika.

Sattvika Constitutions (Psychological Excellence)

Sattvika types are inherently stable, compassionate, and resilient. They are divided into: 1) Brahma Satva: Characterized by purity, truthfulness, absolute self-control, and equal respect for all beings. 2) Mahendra Satva: Demonstrates structural leadership, high valor, and structural organizational capacity. 3) Varuna Satva: Expresses purity, exceptional emotional cleanliness, patience, and a calm, deep mind resembling the ocean. 4) Kaubera Satva: Possesses great capacity for resource wealth management, righteous acquisition, and distribution. 5) Gandharva Satva: Shows a natural propensity for arts, music, dance, aesthetic appreciation, and joy. 6) Yamy Satva: Exhibits unyielding righteousness, promptness, and an absence of attachment or fear. 7) Arsa Satva: Represents the contemplative mind, committed to meditation, deep reading, and intellectual rigor.

Rajasika Constitutions (Dynamic and Reactive Typologies)

Rajasika profiles are driven by desire, ego, and external validation. They include: 1) Asura Satva: Dominated by anger, cruelty, jealousy, and aggressive pursuit of power. 2) Rakshasa Satva: Marked by profound intolerance, destructive behavior, and sensory overindulgence. 3) Paisacha Satva: Characterized by unhygienic habits, gluttony, and a deceitful, manipulative disposition. 4) Sarpa Satva: Possesses a sharp but deeply suspicious, fearful, and envious mindset. 5) Praitra Satva: Characterized by constant discontentment, greed, and a lack of emotional nourishment. 6) Sakuna Satva: Driven by excessive attachments, continuous movement, and sensory flightiness.

Tamasika Constitutions (Inertial and Obscured Typologies)

Tamasika profiles are dominated by structural cognitive blindness and lethargy: 1) Pasu Satva: Characterized by low intelligence, rejection of hygiene, and an exclusive focus on sleeping and eating. 2) Matsya Satva: Marked by exceptional instability, constant internal fear, and a scattered, short attention span. 3) Vanaspatya Satva: Represents complete cognitive stagnation, lack of response to external stimuli, and total apathy.

Analytical Mapping of Manasa Prakriti

Table 2 categorizes and provides a modern psychiatric analog for these classical psychological archetypes.

Table: 2

Prakriti Category	Number of Subtypes	Predominant Psychological Features	Modern Psychological/Psychiatric Analog
Sattvika Profiles	7 (Brahma, Mahendra, Varuna, etc.)	High emotional resilience, altruism, analytical excellence, ethical clarity, adaptive coping.	High emotional intelligence, optimal executive function, profound psychological resilience.
Rajasika Profiles	6 (Asura, Rakshasa, Sarpa, etc.)	Ego-driven, hyper-competitive, aggressive, high anxiety, manipulative tendencies, volatile affect.	Cluster B personality traits (Narcissistic, Borderline, Antisocial), Generalized Anxiety, Type-A personality.
Tamasika Profiles	3 (Pasu, Matsya, Vanaspatya)	Cognitive dullness, deep apathy, structural avoidance, extreme lethargy, low self-awareness.	Major Depressive Disorder with catatonic features, persistent cognitive deficits, intellectual disability.

TRIGUNA DYNAMICS IN PSYCHOPATHOLOGY (MANOVIKARA)

In Ayurvedic psychiatric nosology, mental diseases (Manovikara) do not originate in a vacuum; they manifest from a profound imbalance in the dynamic relationship between the mental humors (Rajas and Tamas) and the cognitive processing units of the mind. When a person is subjected to chronic psychosocial stress, traumatic life events, or improper diet, their inherent Sattva decreases. This decline in Sattva compromises the protective psychological shield, allowing Rajas or Tamas to hyper-proliferate and invade the Manovaha Srotas (the channels of mental conduction and neuro-psychological function).

Ayurveda isolates three primary root causes behind this psychopathological cascade: 1) Pragya-aparadha (Intellectual Blasphemy): This occurs when an individual, despite knowing

the destructive consequences of an action, willfully executes it due to a lack of mental control (Dhrti). It represents a failure of cognitive judgment that drives maladaptive behavioral patterns, such as addiction or risky behavior. 2) Asatmyendriyārtha Samyoga (Improper Sensory Contact): This involves either the overload (Atiyoga), deficiency (Ayoga), or perverse use (Mithyayoga) of the sensory organs, leading directly to neural over-stimulation or sensory exhaustion. 3) Parinama (Temporal/Seasonal Decay): Chronic changes in life stages and seasons that alter systemic chronobiology.

When Rajas dominates the psychopathology, it presents as conditions like Chittodvega (Generalized Anxiety Disorder) or Unmada in its hyper-active/manic manifestations. The patient displays severe psychomotor agitation, flight of ideas, obsessive worrying, and insomnia. Conversely, when Tamas dominates, the presentation shifts to Vishada (Clinical Depression) or Kapha-dominant Unmada. This is clinically characterized by psychomotor retardation, flat affect, learned helplessness, social withdrawal, and severe cognitive slowing. Often, Rajas and Tamas combine to form complex psychiatric syndromes; for example, a mixed manic-depressive state involves a rapid, chaotic fluctuation between the kinetic energy of Rajas and the deadening inertia of Tamas.

Visual Representation of Triguna Interaction

Figure 1 represents the conceptual model of the psychological triad. The expansion of the central Sattva core corresponds with mental resilience, while the expansion of the peripheral Rajas and Tamas zones signals a descent into psychopathology.

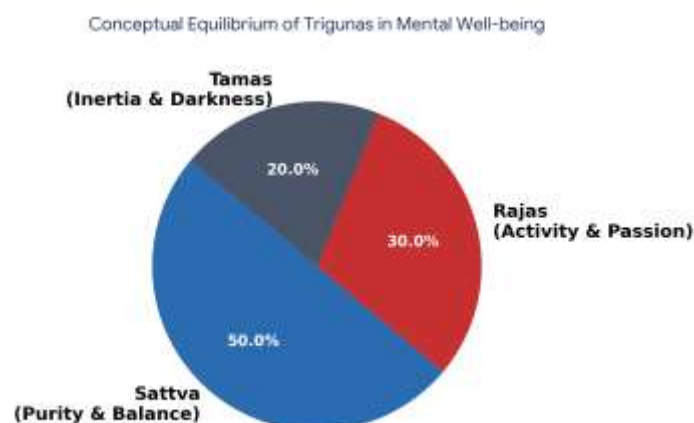


Figure 1: Conceptual Equilibrium of Trigunas in Mental Well-being.

MENTAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT THROUGH TRIGUNA THEORY

The clinical uniqueness of Ayurvedic psychiatry lies in its strategic mandate: to systematically reduce pathological Rajas and Tamas by deliberately cultivating Sattva. This therapeutic objective is accomplished through a structured four-tiered system: Sattvavajaya Chikitsa (Ayurvedic Psychotherapy), Ahara (Dietary Medicine), Vihara (Lifestyle and Behavioral Modification), and Aushadha (Pharmacological Management).

Sattvavajaya Chikitsa (Ayurvedic Psychotherapy)

Sattvavajaya Chikitsa is defined by Acharya Charaka as "Manonigraha Ahitebhyo Arthebhyah"—the structural restraint of the mind from unwholesome or non-adaptive sensory objects. It operates on principles that strongly align with modern Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and mindfulness-based interventions. The core strategy involves restructuring the three cognitive pillars of the psyche: 1) Dhi (Rational Intellect): Correcting cognitive distortions, enhancing reality testing, and re-establishing sound logical frameworks. 2) Dhriti (Mental Willpower/Retention): Fortifying the emotional capacity to resist impulsive, harmful desires and behavioral urges. 3) Smriti (Memory/Recall): Rehabilitating the mind's ability to remember past positive experiences and life lessons, dissolving traumatic cognitive patterns.

Through guided introspective counseling, the therapist helps the patient recognize how excess Rajas (anger, lust, vanity) or excess Tamas (grief, delusion, apathy) is distorting their perception. By re-engaging the rational intellect (Dhi), the patient detaches from maladaptive emotional impulses, expanding their Sattva baseline.

Ahara Chikitsa (Nutritional Psychology)

Ayurveda views nutrition as a critical foundational pillar for psychological health, emphasizing that the subtlest portion of digested food directly forms the mind's substrate. Therefore, dietary interventions are structured around the Guna characteristics of food items:

1) Sattvika Ahara: Fresh, organic, easily digestible, and nutrient-dense foods such as sweet juicy fruits, green leafy vegetables, whole grains, almonds, cow's ghee, and fresh milk. These foods provide clean metabolic energy without creating inflammatory byproducts, directly

nurturing cognitive clarity, calmness, and joy.

2) Rajasika Ahara: Excessively spicy, pungent, sour, salty, deep-fried, and highly processed foods, along with central nervous system stimulants like coffee, tea, and alcohol. These foods trigger immediate sympathetic nervous system dominance, increasing hyper-reactivity, anxiety, and affective instability.

3) Tamasika Ahara: Stale, chemically preserved, re-heated, heavy meat products, and excessively fermented foods. These foods burden the metabolic fire (Agni) and produce cellular toxins (Ama), inducing psychological cloudiness, severe lethargy, and depressive symptoms.

Vihara: Behavioral and Yogic Interventions

Lifestyle modifications act as behavioral stabilizers for the mind. Ayurveda implements strict protocols via Dinacharya (daily biological routines) and Ritucharya (seasonal adaptations) to synchronize circadian rhythms, which stabilizes neurotransmitter synthesis. Furthermore, Sadvritta (righteous social conduct) and Achara Rasayana (behavioral rejuvenation) serve as structural frameworks for social and personal ethics, reducing relational friction and emotional trauma.

Yoga and Pranayama are vital components of Vihara. For an agitated, Rajas-dominant state, cooling and grounding practices such as Shitali Pranayama, Nadi Shodhana (alternate nostril breathing), and restorative Asanas (e.g., Shavasana, Balasana) down-regulate the sympathetic nervous system. For a lethargic, Tamas-dominant depressive state, dynamic practices such as Surya Namaskar, Bhastrika Pranayama, and Kapalabhati stimulate neural pathways, up-regulating metabolic rates and clearing cognitive opacity.

Aushadha (Ayurvedic Psychopharmacology)

When a patient's Sattva is severely depleted and the mental humors are deeply entrenched, lifestyle adjustments alone may be insufficient. Ayurveda utilizes a class of neuroprotective, nootropic botanicals known as Medhya Rasayanas. These herbs act on both a physical level, by crossing the blood-brain barrier to modulate neurotransmission, and a psychological level,

by purging Rajas and Tamas from the channels of the mind.

Key herbs include Shankhapushpi (*Convolvulus pluricaulis*), known for its excellent anxiolytic and memory-enhancing qualities; Mandukaparni (*Centella asiatica*), which boosts microcirculation and cognitive processing; Guduchi (*Tinospora cordifolia*), which targets stress-induced neuro-inflammation; and Yashtimadhu (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*). Other potent psychotropic herbs include Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), which modulates the HPA axis to lower cortisol, and Jatamansi (*Nardostachys jatamansi*), which increases GABA levels to stabilize erratic Rajasika agitation. Formulations such as Kalyanaka Ghrita and Saraswatarishta are regularly deployed to restore mental clarity.

Integrated Management Protocol Matrix

Table 3 outlines an integrated clinical protocol designed to modulate the Triguṇas based on patient presentation.

Table: 3

Target Mental Humor	Dietary Modality (Ahara)	Behavioral & Yogic Practice (Vihara)	Pharmacological Selection (Aushadha)
Hyperactive Rajas (Anxiety, Insomnia, Agitation)	Eliminate capsaicin, caffeine, alcohol. Introduce sweet, unctuous Sattvik foods, cow's ghee, warm milk.	Nadi Shodhana, Pranayama, deep meditation (Dhyana), Sadvritta behavior, calming evening routines.	Jatamansi, Brahmi, Shankhapushpi, Kalyanaka Ghrita (GABAergic and calming agents).
Pathological Tamas (Depression, Lethargy, Apathy)	Eliminate heavy meats, frozen, and stale food. Introduce light, warm, spiced food (ginger, black pepper).	Surya Namaskar, active Bhastrika, Pranayama, structured physical exercise, behavioral activation.	Vacha, Jyotishmati, Ashwagandha, Saraswatarishta (CNS stimulants and adaptogens).

Optimizing Sattva (Maintenance & Prevention)	Pure organic vegetarian diet, whole grains, fresh almonds, honey, seasonal ripe fruits.	Consistent daily routine (Dinacharya), spiritual study (Svadhyaya), altruistic social service.	Regular low-dose Medhya Rasayanas (e.g., daily Mandukaparni juice or Chyawanprash).
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DISCUSSION AND MODERN CONVERGENCE

The analytical value of the Triguna theory lies in its capacity to translate fluid behavioral phenotypes into systematic, actionable clinical targets. Unlike modern diagnostic manuals like the DSM-5, which rely on symptom checklists, the Triguna framework assesses the underlying energetic quality of the mind. This approach shifts the therapeutic question from "What psychiatric disorder does this patient have?" to "What forces are clouding this patient's natural mental clarity, and how can we rebuild their resilience?"

This holistic perspective converges with several contemporary psychological concepts. For instance, the transition from Sattva to Rajas and Tamas aligns with Robert Cloninger's Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI), where self-directedness and cooperativeness represent Satvik traits, while harm avoidance and novelty seeking parallel the dynamic swings of Rajas and Tamas. Furthermore, the practice of Sattvavajaya Chikitsa mirrors modern third-wave behavioral therapies, particularly Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Both systems emphasize identifying automatic, unwholesome thoughts (Rajas/Tamas) and utilizing the observing self (Dhi/Sattva) to disengage from maladaptive behaviors.

Integrating the Triguna model into mainstream mental health care offers a powerful, non-stigmatizing vocabulary for patients. Framing anxiety as an over-activation of Rajas or depression as a heavy accumulation of Tamas helps separate the individual's core identity from their symptoms. This approach reduces self-stigma and empowers patients to take an active role in their recovery through tangible adjustments to their diet, lifestyle, and mental habits.

CONCLUSION

The Triguna theory of Ayurveda provides a comprehensive, timeless, and sophisticated framework for understanding and managing mental health. By categorizing the human psyche into Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas, it addresses the full spectrum of psychological experience—from optimal mental resilience and moral clarity to acute psychopathology. Within this model, psychiatric disorders are viewed as dynamic imbalances of the mental humors (Rajas and Tamas) that obscure the mind's natural, healthy state of Sattva.

Ayurveda's multi-dimensional approach—combining psychotherapeutic cognitive restructuring (Sattvavajaya), nutritional psychology (Ahara), circadian alignment and yogic practices (Vihara), and targeted nootropic herbs (Aushadha)—offers a comprehensive model for care. This framework can effectively complement modern integrative psychiatry, helping to shift the global mental health paradigm from temporary symptom suppression to deep, sustainable emotional rehabilitation and preventative well-being.

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Received Date: 15 February 2026

Accepted Date: 13 March 2026

Published Date: 26 March 2026

Citation: Prof. Vaibhav Gupta, Shalini Singh, Mayank Bhardwaj. Interpretation of Triguna Theory in Mental Health Management According to Ayurveda. Journal of Samhita, Shiddhanta and Sanskrit. 2026; 4(1): 1-13p.