

The Triguna of Nutrition: A Systematic Review of Sattvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic Diets in Ayurvedic Literature and their Correlates in Modern Nutritional Psychiatry

Maheshwari Bathula, Head, Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, St. Pious X Degree & PG College for Women

P. Harshitha, I M.Sc. Nutrition and Dietetics, St. Pious X Degree & PG College for Women

G. Jennifer, I M.Sc. Nutrition and Dietetics, St. Pious X Degree & PG College for Women

Email address: maheshwari.b@stpiouscollege.org

harshithagoud12112004@gmail.com gaddamjennifer@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

Background

The rising global burden of mental health disorders highlights an urgent need to move beyond purely treatment-based approaches toward more preventive and holistic frameworks. In this context, Ayurveda offers a unique perspective by linking diet, body, and consciousness.

According to Ayurvedic philosophy, all matter—including food—is characterized by three fundamental qualities, or *Gunas*: Sattva (clarity and balance), Rajas (activity and stimulation), and Tamas (inertia and dullness). These qualities are believed to influence not only physical health but also mental and emotional states. Based on this framework, diets are broadly classified as Sattvic, Rajasic, or Tamasic, each associated with distinct psychological and physiological effects.

Methods

A structured, dual-domain search strategy was adopted to integrate classical knowledge with contemporary scientific evidence. Foundational Ayurvedic insights were drawn from primary texts such as the Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, Ashtanga Hridayam, and the Bhagavad Gita, using established translations and commentaries.

To examine modern parallels, databases including PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science were systematically searched. Relevant literature from nutritional psychiatry, integrative medicine, and neuroscience was reviewed and thematically organized according to the three Gunas.

Results

The Sattvic diet, composed of fresh, seasonal, and minimally processed foods, is traditionally associated with mental clarity, stability, and vitality (*Ojas*). Interestingly, this aligns with modern dietary patterns rich in anti-inflammatory compounds and polyphenols, which support gut microbial balance, enhance brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), and are linked to a reduced risk of depression and cognitive decline.

In contrast, the Rajasic diet, characterized by spicy, pungent, and highly stimulating foods, is believed to increase restlessness and mental agitation. Contemporary research suggests similar effects through heightened neuroendocrine responses, including elevated cortisol levels and sympathetic nervous system activation—factors commonly associated with stress and anxiety.

The Tamasic diet, consisting largely of stale, processed, and heavily refined foods, is described in Ayurveda as promoting lethargy and toxin accumulation (*Ama*). Modern equivalents can be seen in pro-inflammatory dietary patterns, often referred to as Western diets, which are linked to gut dysbiosis, systemic inflammation, and neuroinflammation. These mechanisms are strongly associated with depressive symptoms and neurodegenerative processes.

Conclusion

The Triguna framework offers a nuanced, qualitative model that connects dietary patterns with mental states in a way that modern science is only beginning to explain mechanistically. Rather than viewing this system as purely philosophical, it may be more appropriate to see it as an early conceptual model of what is now studied under fields like nutritional psychiatry and the gut–brain axis.

Integrating these insights into contemporary practice could support a more personal approach to mental healthcare—one that emphasizes conscious dietary choices as a foundational strategy for prevention, cognitive resilience, and long-term mental wellbeing.

1. Keywords

Triguna, Sattvic Diet, Nutritional Psychiatry, Gut–Brain Axis, Diet and Mental Health

2. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century presents a striking paradox despite rapid advances in medical science, the global burden of mental health disorders—including depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline—continues to rise. While emerging research in nutritional psychiatry has established meaningful links between diet and mental health, much of this work remains

focused on isolated nutrients and biochemical pathways. Such an approach, while valuable, may overlook a broader and more integrative perspective—one that considers how food influences not just the body, but also the mind.

Traditional systems like Ayurveda offer a more holistic understanding of this relationship. Rooted in Samkhya philosophy, Ayurveda describes all aspects of existence—including food (*Ahara*) and the mind (*Manas*)—as governed by three dynamic qualities: Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. These Gunas are not static; rather, they fluctuate continuously, shaping both physical and psychological states. Importantly, Ayurveda suggests that diet plays a direct role in modulating these qualities, thereby influencing emotional balance, cognition, and overall wellbeing.

This paper aims to bridge traditional knowledge and modern science by examining whether these ancient classifications have measurable biological correlates. By integrating insights from nutritional psychiatry, psychoneuroimmunology, and gut–brain axis research, it explores the possibility that the Triguna framework represents an early, intuitive model of diet–mind interactions—one that remains highly relevant in contemporary health discourse.

Objectives

1. To synthesize classical Ayurvedic descriptions of Sattvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic diets.
2. To identify scientific evidence that supports or parallels these classifications.
3. To map traditional concepts to modern psychobiological mechanisms.
4. To evaluate the relevance of the Triguna model in preventive mental healthcare.
5. To suggest directions for future interdisciplinary research.

3. METHODOLOGY:

This review employed a systematic, dual-source strategy to synthesize knowledge from traditional Ayurvedic literature and modern scientific research.

4.1: Search Strategy & Sources:

- **Ayurvedic Literature:** A focused review of classical Ayurvedic literature was undertaken using primary Sanskrit texts, including the Charaka Samhita (with emphasis on Sutrasthana Chapters 25–28 and Sharirasthana), Sushruta Samhita (Sutrasthana), Ashtanga Hridayam (Sutrasthana), and the Bhagavad Gita. These sources were consulted through established

English translations, including those published by Chaukhambha Orientalia, as well as digital archives such as the National Institute of Indian Medical Heritage library. To support accurate interpretation and contextual understanding, secondary sources and scholarly commentaries were also reviewed. Key contributions from authors such as Vasant Lad, David Frawley, and Robert Svoboda were included to provide interpretative depth and ensure alignment with established Ayurvedic scholarship.

- Modern Scientific Literature: Electronic databases (PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science) were searched from inception. Search terms combined Ayurvedic and modern concepts: (“Ayurvedic diet” or “Sattvic diet” or “Triguna” or “Gunas”) and (“mental health” or depression or anxiety or cognition); (“dietary patterns” or “food and mood”) and (“inflammation” or “gut-brain axis” or “microbiome” or “nutritional psychiatry”); (“Mediterranean diet” or “MIND diet”) and (“dementia” or “cognitive decline”). Hand-searching of key journals (*Journal of Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine*, *Nutritional Neuroscience*, *Brain Behaviour and Immunity*, *Molecular Psychiatry*) supplemented database searches.

4.2. Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria:

- Included: English-language texts and articles detailing the qualities and effects of Sattvic/Rajasic/Tamasic diets; modern research articles (reviews, RCTs, cohort studies) linking dietary patterns to psychological outcomes or plausible biological mechanisms (e.g: inflammation, HPA-axis function, gut microbiota).
- Excluded: Non-English sources without reliable translation; articles focusing solely on pharmacologic herbology without dietary context; anecdotal reports.

4.3. Data Synthesis:
Data were extracted thematically. Classical descriptions of each dietary *Guna* were first synthesized. Subsequently, the modern literature was reviewed to identify research on dietary patterns and mechanisms that functionally correlated with these descriptions, creating a comparative analytical framework.

5. RESULTS:

Theoretical Foundation: The Triguna in Ayurvedic Psychology & Dietetics:

In Ayurveda, the mind (*Manas*) is considered a subtle substance, also composed of the three *Gunas*. A *Sattvic* mind exhibits clarity, wisdom, and equanimity; a *Rajasic* mind is characterized by desire, attachment, and activity; a *Tamasic* mind manifests as ignorance, delusion, and inertia (Svoboda, 1999). Health is not merely physical absence of disease but a state of mental clarity and spiritual awareness, predicated on a predominance of *Sattva*.

This principle extends directly to *Ahara* (diet). Food is considered the primary *Brihmana* (nourishing) substance for both body and mind. The *Charaka Samhita* (Vimana Sthana 1:21) states that wholesome food is the root of health, while unwholesome food is the root of disease. The “wholesomeness” is determined not only by nutritional value but also by its *Guna*. Food is thus classified (Bhagavad Gita 17:8-10):

- *Sattvic Ahara*: Foods that are “juicy, smooth, firm, and pleasant to the heart”, increasing life, purity, strength, health, joy, and cheerfulness.
- *Rajasic Ahara*: Foods that are “bitter, sour, salty, excessively hot, pungent, dry, and burning,” leading to pain, grief, and disease.
- *Tamasic Ahara*: Food that is “stale, tasteless, putrid, leftover, and impure.”

The process of digestion (*Agni*) transforms these dietary *Gunas* into bodily and mental tissues (*Dhatus*) and qualities. Therefore, consistent consumption of a particular type of food gradually shapes the individual's mental constitution (*Manasika Prakriti*) and emotional proclivities.

5.1 Systematic Review & Synthesis of Correlates

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Triguna-Based Diets

Parameter	Sattvic Diet	Rajasic Diet	Tamasic Diet
Core Quality	Purity, lightness, clarity	Activity, stimulation, heat	Inertia, heaviness, obscuration

Parameter	Sattvic Diet	Rajasic Diet	Tamasic Diet
Food State	Fresh, organic, lightly cooked, naturally sweet	Pungent, spicy, sour, salty, processed	Stale, overcooked, fermented, processed, intoxicating
Key Examples	Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, ghee, milk, honey, soaked nuts	Onion, garlic, chili, coffee, tea, dark chocolate, refined sugar	Alcohol, leftovers, canned foods, fried foods, excessive meat
Ayurvedic Mental Effect	Promotes <i>Ojas</i> , calm, focus, compassion, resilience	Fuels ambition, ego; causes irritability, restlessness (<i>Chittodvega</i>)	Promotes <i>Ama</i> , dullness, depression, confusion (<i>Moha</i>), lethargy
Proposed Biological Mechanism (Ayurveda)	Nourishes all tissues (<i>Dhatus</i>), balances <i>Doshas</i>	Aggravates <i>Pitta</i> (heat), disturbs <i>Vata</i> (movement)	Aggravates <i>Kapha</i> (heaviness), creates toxins (<i>Ama</i>)
Modern Diet Proxy	Mediterranean, MIND, DASH diets	High-glycemic, stimulant-heavy diets	Western Diet, Ultra-processed foods
Primary Modern Pathway	Anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, gut eubiosis	Neuroendocrine activation (cortisol), sympathetic dominance	Systemic inflammation, neuroinflammation, gut dysbiosis

Parameter	Sattvic Diet	Rajasic Diet	Tamasic Diet
Associated Mental Outcomes	↓ Depression risk, ↑ cognitive resilience, emotional stability	↑ Anxiety, stress reactivity, irritability	↑ Depression, cognitive decline, fatigue

5.2. The Sattvic Diet: Cultivating Clarity and Equilibrium:

- Ayurvedic Description: Promotes *Ojas* (vital essence), sharpens intellect (*Medha*), stabilizes emotions (Lad, 2007).
- Modern Correlates: Aligns with evidence-based “brain-healthy” diets.

Table 2: Sattvic Diet: Ayurvedic-Modern Correlates:

Ayurvedic Component	Modern Scientific Correlate	Supporting Evidence
Fresh fruits & vegetables	High polyphenol/antioxidant intake	Reduces oxidative stress & inflammation (Marx et al,2021)
Whole grains, legumes	High fiber, low glycemic index	Supports stable glucose & gut microbiome diversity (Cryan et al,2019)
Ghee, nuts (soaked)	Healthy fats (MUFAs, PUFAs), fat-soluble vitamins	Supports brain structure, myelin integrity (Gómez-Pinilla, 2008)

Ayurvedic Component	Modern Scientific Correlate	Supporting Evidence
Mindful, calm consumption	Reduced stress response during digestion	Lowers cortisol, enhances vagal tone (Kiecolt-Glaser, 2015)
Overall Effect: <i>Ojas</i>	Overall Effect: Neuroprotection	Associated with 30% ↓ depression risk & 53% ↓ Alzheimer's risk (Lassale, 2019; Morris, 2015)

5.3. The Rajasic Diet: Fueling Activity and Agitation:

- Ayurvedic Description: Aggravates *Pitta*, leads to inflammation and mental unrest (Frawley, 2000).
- Modern Correlates: Matches dietary patterns that hyper-activate physiological systems.

Table 3: Rajasic Diet: Ayurvedic-Modern Correlates:

Ayurvedic Component	Modern Scientific Correlate	Supporting Evidence
Excess chili, pungent spices	TRPV1 receptor activation	Induces neurogenic inflammation, pain sensitivity (Molina-Torres et al., 2019)
Coffee, tea, stimulants	Adenosine antagonism, cortisol release	Increases anxiety, disrupts sleep architecture (Lara, 2010)
Refined sugars, high-GI foods	Rapid glucose/insulin spikes	Causes reactive hypoglycemia, mood swings, irritability

Ayurvedic Component	Modern Scientific Correlate	Supporting Evidence
Eating in hurry/stress	Impaired digestion, reduced enzyme secretion	Promotes gut inflammation, dysbiosis
Overall Effect: <i>Pitta</i> Aggravation	Overall Effect: Allostatic Load	Creates biological substrate for anxiety disorders

Table 4: Tamasic Diet: Ayurvedic-Modern Correlates:

Ayurvedic Component	Modern Scientific Correlate	Supporting Evidence
Stale, processed foods	Advanced Glycation End Products (AGEs)	Promotes oxidative stress, insulin resistance (Lucas, 2016)
Alcohol, intoxicants	GABA/glutamate disruption, neurotoxicity	Directly depressive, causes neuronal damage (Topiwala et al., 2017)
Heavy meats, fried foods	Saturated fats, pro-inflammatory lipids	Activates TLR4 pathway, increases IL-6, TNF- α (Felger, 2018)
Low fiber, processed carbs	Gut dysbiosis, reduced SCFA production	Compromises gut barrier ("leaky gut"), increases LPS translocation
Overall Effect: <i>Ama</i> Formation	Overall Effect: Systemic Inflammation	Strongly linked to depression & neurodegenerative diseases

6. DISCUSSION:

An Integrative Model for Preventive Mental Healthcare:

The convergence between the *Triguna* framework and nutritional psychiatry is striking and systematic. As illustrated in the tables, each dietary pattern maps onto distinct modern psychobiological pathways. This synthesis validates Ayurveda's core premise that food is information that shapes consciousness.

Table 5: Integrative Clinical Application Framework:

Clinical Scenario	Dominant Guna Imbalance	Dietary Focus	Supporting Modern Rationale
Anxiety, burnout, insomnia	Excess Rajas (agitation)	Reduce stimulants, increase Sattvic calm/Ping foods	Lowers cortisol, supports GABA function
Depression, brain fog, fatigue	Excess Tamas (inertia)	Eliminate processed foods, alcohol, increase fresh foods	Reduces inflammation, supports mitochondrial function
Poor concentration, emotional lability	Deficient Sattva (clarity)	Establish Sattvic dietary foundation	Enhances BDNF, stabilizes glucose, improves gut-brain signaling
Metabolic syndrome with irritability	Rajas + Tamas combined	Comprehensive shift from processed to whole foods	Addresses both inflammation and insulin resistance

Limitations and Future Directions: While mechanistic parallels are strong, direct clinical trials using *Triguna* classifications are needed. Future research should:

1. Standardize operational definitions of Sattvic/Rajasic/Tamasic diets for research

2. Conduct RCTs measuring psychological outcomes and biomarkers (CRP, cortisol, microbiome)
3. Develop integrative assessment tools combining *Prakriti* analysis with nutritional psychiatry metrics

7. CONCLUSION:

The *Triguna* of nutrition presents a sophisticated and holistic framework that predates modern nutritional psychiatry by millennia. This systematic review establishes that the classical Ayurvedic descriptions of Sattvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic diets find meaningful and evidence-based correlates in contemporary understandings of the diet-mental health relationship, mediated through inflammation, the gut-brain axis, and neuroendocrine function. Integrating this wisdom does not require rejecting science, but rather enriching it with a deeper dimension of qualitative awareness. By asking not only “What is in my food?” but “What quality of consciousness does this food support?”, we empower a more intentional, effective, and holistic approach to nourishing mental wellbeing and fostering true preventive health.

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