



National Journal of Hindi & Sanskrit Research

ISSN: 2454-9177

NJHSR 2026; 1(64): 202-205

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Shatkarma in Integrative Health: From Yogic Purification Roots to Modern Therapeutic Evidence

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18753852>

Abstract:

Shatkarma, the sixfold yogic purification system described in classical Hatha Yoga literature, represents one of the most sophisticated internal cleansing methodologies within traditional Indian knowledge systems. Comprising Dhauti, Basti, Neti, Trataka, Nauli, and Kapalabhati, these practices were designed to purify the body, balance physiological humors, regulate pranic flow, and prepare the aspirant for higher yogic disciplines. In recent decades, growing global concern over lifestyle-related disorders—including metabolic dysfunction, gastrointestinal disturbances, respiratory illness, and stress-related syndromes—has prompted renewed scientific interest in traditional cleansing techniques. This paper presents an independent scholarly synthesis of Shatkarma, examining its classical origins, procedural dimensions, physiological mechanisms, and emerging clinical applications. Drawing upon traditional yogic theory and contemporary biomedical interpretation, the discussion positions Shatkarma as a preventive and therapeutic adjunct within integrative healthcare. While acknowledging the need for methodological rigor in research and supervised practice in application, the paper argues that Shatkarma offers a structured model of embodied self-regulation capable of contributing meaningfully to modern public health challenges.

Keywords: Shatkarma, Shatkriya, Yoga, Yogic cleansing technique, Yogic Detoxification.

1. Introduction:

The rapid transformation of human lifestyles in the twenty-first century has led to a dramatic rise in non-communicable diseases. Sedentary habits, processed diets, irregular sleep cycles, environmental pollutants, and chronic psychological stress have collectively undermined physiological resilience. Conventional medical systems provide effective symptomatic management; however, long-term dependence on pharmacological interventions often fails to address underlying behavioral and functional imbalances. This context has stimulated interest in holistic and preventive modalities rooted in traditional knowledge systems.

Among these, Hatha Yoga offers a distinctive framework that integrates physical discipline, breath regulation, mental training, and internal purification. Central to this system is *Shatkarma* (also called Shatkriya), a set of six purification practices intended to cleanse the body's internal systems and optimize functional equilibrium. Unlike general physical exercise, Shatkarma emphasizes deliberate removal of accumulated waste, stagnation, and imbalance as prerequisites for health and spiritual evolution.

Historically, Shatkarma was prescribed for individuals exhibiting excessive doshic accumulation or physical impurities that impeded yogic practice. In contemporary contexts, these techniques are increasingly studied for their relevance in digestive disorders, respiratory dysfunction, autonomic imbalance, and psychosomatic conditions.

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The present paper seeks to examine Shatkarma not merely as a ritualistic cleansing system, but as a structured physiological intervention with plausible biomedical correlates.

2. Classical Foundations of Shatkarma:

The principal textual sources for Shatkarma are the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, *Gheranda Samhita*, and *Hatharatnavali*. These treatises describe six purificatory actions:

1. **Dhauti** – cleansing of the alimentary canal and related structures
2. **Basti** – yogic colon cleansing
3. **Neti** – nasal purification
4. **Trataka** – steady gazing for ocular and mental purification
5. **Nauli** – abdominal churning
6. **Kapalabhati** – forceful exhalatory cleansing of the cranial region

In traditional theory, impurities (*mala*) obstruct the flow of prana within subtle channels (*nadis*), resulting in disease and mental disturbance. Shatkarma is therefore preparatory—removing gross obstructions so that higher practices such as pranayama and meditation can be undertaken safely. Importantly, classical texts caution that these kriyas should be learned under competent guidance, emphasizing their potency and potential risks if improperly performed.

3. Dhauti: Gastrointestinal and Upper System Cleansing

Dhauti encompasses a range of cleansing procedures targeting the digestive tract. It includes internal cleansing (Antar Dhauti), oral hygiene practices (Danta Dhauti), upper gastrointestinal cleansing (Hrida Dhauti), and rectal cleansing (Mula Shodhana). Contemporary practice often highlights three major techniques: Kunjal Kriya (Vamana Dhauti), Vastra Dhauti, and Shankha Prakshalana.

Kunjal Kriya involves drinking lukewarm saline water followed by voluntary regurgitation. Traditionally recommended for hyperacidity and digestive imbalance, modern interpretations suggest that it may reduce gastric irritation, regulate vagal tone, and enhance parasympathetic activity.

Vastra Dhauti consists of swallowing and withdrawing a sterile cloth strip to cleanse the esophageal and gastric mucosa. Due to its invasive nature, it is rarely practiced outside advanced traditional settings.

Shankha Prakshalana is a systematic intestinal wash combining saline water ingestion with specific dynamic postures to promote peristalsis. Research exploring modified versions (Laghu Shankha Prakshalana) has reported improvements in bowel regularity, reduction in constipation scores, and enhanced subjective digestive comfort.

Physiologically, these practices may influence gut motility, microbiome balance, and enteric nervous system function. The gut–brain axis provides a compelling framework: mechanical cleansing combined with autonomic stimulation could modulate inflammatory responses and improve systemic metabolic markers. However, excessive or unsupervised use carries risks such as electrolyte imbalance and mucosal irritation.

4. Basti: Yogic Colon Regulation

Basti is traditionally described as a yogic enema performed either with water (Jala Basti) or without water using abdominal suction (Sthala Basti). Classical accounts emphasize its ability to eliminate toxins, regulate Vata dosha, and relieve abdominal disorders.

From a biomedical perspective, colon cleansing influences bowel motility and may temporarily relieve constipation. However, unlike commercial colon hydrotherapy, yogic Basti integrates breath control and abdominal muscular engagement. This integration may strengthen pelvic floor musculature and improve autonomic balance.

Preliminary observations suggest potential benefit in chronic constipation, irritable bowel patterns, and certain metabolic disturbances. Yet, rigorous clinical trials remain limited. Safety concerns include mucosal trauma and infection if hygienic standards are not maintained. Therefore, Basti should be approached cautiously within supervised therapeutic contexts.

5. Neti: Nasal and Respiratory Purification

Neti includes *Jala Neti* (saline nasal irrigation) and *Sutra Neti* (nasal thread cleansing). Jala Neti, widely practiced today, involves passing warm saline solution through one nostril and allowing it to flow out the other. This technique parallels modern saline irrigation therapies recommended for sinusitis and allergic rhinitis.

Clinical studies on nasal irrigation support its efficacy in reducing mucosal inflammation, clearing allergens, and improving sinus drainage. Yogic literature further attributes cognitive clarity and enhanced pranic flow to regular practice.

Mechanistically, Neti may improve mucociliary clearance, reduce pathogen load, and stimulate trigeminal nerve endings, potentially influencing autonomic regulation. It has also been associated with improved respiratory efficiency when combined with pranayama practices.

Sutra Neti, involving insertion of a soft thread through the nostril and out the mouth, is less commonly practiced due to discomfort and required expertise. While traditional texts extol its benefits, contemporary medical validation remains sparse.

6. Trataka: Ocular Cleansing and Mental Stabilization

Trataka is a steady gazing practice, typically performed by focusing on a candle flame or fixed point without blinking

until tears are produced. Though often categorized among purification practices, its emphasis is both ocular and psychological.

The lacrimal secretion induced during Trataka is believed to cleanse the eyes. More significantly, the practice enhances concentration, reduces mental restlessness, and prepares the practitioner for meditation.

Emerging research indicates that focused visual attention practices can improve cognitive performance, reduce anxiety levels, and enhance parasympathetic activity. Neurophysiological models suggest that sustained attention training influences frontal cortical networks and emotional regulation circuits.

Trataka thus bridges physical cleansing with neurocognitive refinement, illustrating the multidimensional character of Shatkarma.

7. Nauli: Abdominal Muscle Churning

Nauli involves isolation and rhythmic rotation of the rectus abdominis muscles. This dynamic abdominal massage stimulates digestive organs and enhances metabolic activity. Traditionally regarded as one of the most powerful kriyas, Nauli is said to ignite digestive fire (*Agni*).

Biomechanically, Nauli increases intra-abdominal pressure variations, massages visceral organs, and stimulates enteric circulation. It may enhance insulin sensitivity indirectly through improved metabolic regulation and weight control when combined with broader yogic practice.

Given its complexity, Nauli requires progressive training. Contraindications include pregnancy, hernia, hypertension, and acute abdominal conditions.

8. Kapalabhati: Cranial Purification through Forceful Exhalation

Kapalabhati consists of rapid, forceful exhalations with passive inhalations. Though often classified as pranayama, classical texts include it among Shatkarma due to its cleansing effect on the respiratory tract.

Scientific investigations suggest that Kapalabhati increases expiratory flow rates, strengthens respiratory musculature, and enhances pulmonary ventilation. It may also influence heart rate variability, indicating modulation of autonomic tone.

Additionally, rhythmic abdominal contractions during Kapalabhati may stimulate digestive organs and improve metabolic efficiency. Psychological benefits include reduced stress perception and enhanced alertness.

However, excessive intensity can provoke dizziness or hyperventilation; thus, graded instruction is essential.

9. Mechanisms of Action: An Integrative Perspective

The therapeutic potential of Shatkarma may be interpreted through several interrelated mechanisms:

1. **Mechanical Cleansing** – Removal of mucus, residual waste, and stagnation from gastrointestinal and respiratory tracts.
2. **Autonomic Regulation** – Stimulation of vagal pathways and improved parasympathetic dominance.
3. **Neuroendocrine Modulation** – Influence on stress hormones and inflammatory mediators via gut–brain and lung–brain interactions.
4. **Metabolic Optimization** – Enhancement of digestive efficiency and possibly improved glycemic regulation.
5. **Psychological Reset** – Induction of mindfulness, emotional release, and cognitive clarity.

These mechanisms align with contemporary models of psychoneuroimmunology, suggesting that localized cleansing practices may exert systemic effects.

10. Shatkarma in Lifestyle Disorders

Lifestyle disorders such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, chronic constipation, asthma, and anxiety share underlying features of inflammation, autonomic imbalance, and metabolic dysregulation. Shatkarma addresses these factors at foundational levels:

- **Digestive Disorders:** Dhauti and Nauli may improve bowel motility and reduce bloating.
- **Respiratory Conditions:** Neti and Kapalabhati enhance airway clearance and lung capacity.
- **Stress and Anxiety:** Trataka and Kapalabhati regulate attention and autonomic tone.
- **Metabolic Syndromes:** Combined abdominal kriyas may support weight management and glycemic balance.

Although promising, evidence remains preliminary. Most available studies involve small sample sizes and short intervention periods. Large-scale randomized controlled trials are needed to establish standardized protocols and safety parameters.

11. Safety, Contraindications, and Ethical Considerations

Shatkarma practices, particularly Dhauti and Basti, are powerful interventions requiring professional supervision. Contraindications include gastrointestinal ulcers, hypertension (for certain kriyas), pregnancy, recent abdominal surgery, and severe systemic illness.

Ethically, practitioners and therapists must ensure informed consent, proper training, and hygienic conditions. Modern adaptation should preserve classical intent while aligning with biomedical safety standards.

12. Future Directions for Research

Future investigations should prioritize:

- Longitudinal studies examining metabolic and inflammatory biomarkers.
- Standardization of procedural protocols.
- Comparative studies with conventional therapies.

- Exploration of microbiome alterations following intestinal cleansing.
- Neuroimaging studies assessing cognitive effects of Trataka and Kapalabhati.

Such research could bridge traditional wisdom with evidence-based practice.

13. Conclusion

Shatkarma represents a comprehensive and systematic approach to internal purification rooted in the classical traditions of Hatha Yoga. Rather than being merely ritualistic or symbolic practices of the past, these six cleansing techniques reflect a refined understanding of bodily regulation and preventive health. They emphasize purification as a foundational step for maintaining physiological balance, enhancing vitality, and preparing the individual for higher yogic practices. By addressing the digestive tract, respiratory passages, sensory organs, and subtle psychophysiological systems, Shatkarma demonstrates an integrated model of health that connects the body and mind in a functional continuum.

Emerging scientific literature, although still limited in methodological rigor and scale, provides preliminary support for the therapeutic potential of these practices. Evidence suggests beneficial effects on respiratory efficiency, gastrointestinal function, metabolic regulation, autonomic balance, and psychological well-being. The proposed mechanisms—such as improved circulation, enhanced vagal tone, detoxification, and neurosensory stimulation—offer plausible explanations for the observed outcomes. However, more controlled clinical trials and standardized protocols are required to establish definitive efficacy and safety guidelines.

In the context of rising lifestyle-related disorders, stress-related conditions, and increasing healthcare expenditure, Shatkarma offers a low-cost, accessible, and self-empowering model of preventive care. Its true value lies not only in symptomatic relief but also in fostering self-awareness, discipline, and internal regulation. Nevertheless, integration into modern health systems must be approached with scientific scrutiny, proper instruction, and clinical supervision to prevent misuse or adverse effects. When practiced responsibly and adapted appropriately, Shatkarma holds significant potential to contribute meaningfully to holistic health promotion and sustainable well-being in contemporary society.

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