



# *Arishta lakshana* (Near death sign)- A Historical Review

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**Abstract:** Life begins with the association of consciousness, or the *Atma* (soul), with the five fundamental elements (*panchamahabhuta*) and ends in the dissolution of this association. Indian classical texts emphasize on identifying certain signs and symptoms that could forebear, with some level of certainty, imminent death. This comprehensive review delves into the historical evolution and significance of *Arishta Lakshanas*, which are fatal signs and symptoms indicating imminent death. The study covers various *Ayurvedic classical* texts start from the *Veda* to till recent era. In this review also analyze near death sign from contemporary science and also workshops and research initiatives by *Rashtriya Ayurveda Vidyapeetha*. In the *Vedic* period, scatter references are available and from *Samhita* text structured section of near-death sign available. Those gradually become more practice oriented. Overall, the historical journey presented here underscores the significance of *Arishta Lakshanas* as a crucial aspect of prognosis and end-of-life care in traditional Indian medicine systems. Over centuries, this knowledge has been passed down through generation of practitioners, contributing to the development of comprehensive end of life care practices with in *Ayurveda*.

**Index Terms** – *Arishta Lakshanas*, near death signs and symptoms, Imminent death, *Ayurveda*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Arishta lakshanas* are the fatal signs and symptoms which denote imminent death. Death definitely follows after the manifestation of *Arishta lakshanas*. Person is either diseased; in the last days of life, distinctive, bedside physical signs or surrounding indicates signal that death is imminent. There are several bedside clinical signs. Word *Arishta* is traced from *Vedic* literatures. *Arishta* can be identified and also be classified according to involvement of *Dosha*, *Dushya*, *Sthana*, *Sharir* as per *Ayurvediya*. The study of Indian medical as well as spiritual literature reveals that records of *Arishta lakshana* can be traced back to *Vedas*.<sup>1</sup> From the historical point of view, it has divided in 5 parts as below:

1. Vedic period- 6000 - 4000 B.C.
2. Upanishad / Purana period- 4000-1000 B.C.
3. Samhita period- 1000 B.C. – 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.
4. Medieval period- 8<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D. - 17<sup>th</sup> century A.D.
5. Modern period- 18<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D. - till now.

### 1. VEDIKA KALA (6000-4000 BC):

*Vedas* are the oldest record of religion and literature of the world. *Ayurveda* is considered to be the *Upaveda* of *Atharvaveda*. The history of Indian medicine starts with *Veda*.

*Rigveda*<sup>ii</sup>, *Sukla Yajurveda*<sup>iii</sup>, *Atharvaveda*<sup>iv</sup> use many words like *Arishta*, *Arishtaa*, *Arishtaata*, *Arishtam*, *Arishtae*, *Arishtabhi*, *Arishtim*, *Arishtaam*, *Arishtayai* etc. appears in different places to be used for the meaning of non-violence, blessing, *Arjun*, integrity.

From the above references it can be said that word *Aristha* has been used in *Vedika Kala* but meaning of word *Arishta* has not studied in the contains of disease & near-death sign.

### 2. PURANA: (4000-1000 B.C.)

*Purana* contain a lot of details relating to health care procedures, treatments, drugs and surgical procedures.

The importance given to the system of *Ayurveda* can be clearly read out from the *Purana*. The description of *Panchamahabhoota*, *Tridosha*, diseases and their manifestation, medicines and details about death are seen in different *Purana*.

Apart from the mentioning of health, diseases and treatment, there is discussion about the aspects of death in most of them.

In the *Siva Purana* the queries of *Goddess Parvati* regarding death and its signs are answered by *Lord Siva*. During the discussion, *Siva* mentions about 18 signs which indicate the forthcoming death of a person.<sup>v</sup>

There are 18 Chief Puranas and 18 Sub-Puranas<sup>vi</sup>, with over 400,000 verses. Among the *Mahapurana*, *Garuda Purana* is considered to be the treatise which details more about the death. The signs of forthcoming death are not described in detail, but explanations about the liberation of *Atma* from the body, its relation with *Prana* etc are seen in the *Preta Khanda*. Death is explained as the detachment of soul from the body by the effect of *Kala*.<sup>vii</sup> It is said that during the time of death certain diseases raises up its head.<sup>viii</sup>

In the *Agni purana*, the auspicious and inauspicious features of *Purushaand Stri* are mentioned in the 145<sup>th</sup> chapter (*Purusha Lakshana*) and 146<sup>th</sup> chapter (*Stri Lakshana*). These signs were used to determine if a person has good fortune and lifespan.<sup>ix</sup> The aspects of death are dealt in topics under the concept of *Pralaya* or *Laya*.

### JYOTISHA SHASTRA: -(3000B.C.)

The understanding of *Jyotisha Shastra* is an integral part in understanding many concepts in *Rishta*. *Brihat Parashara Horashastra*, an authentic *Jyotisha* text, contains references about life span (*Ayu*), Sign of definite death (*Arishta*) and death indicating sign (*Marana Karaka*). Near death sign with regard to the planetary positions is mentioned in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter, *Arishta Vivechana Adhyaya*. *Maharshi Parasara* quotes that till the 24<sup>th</sup> year of a person he will have *Janma Arishta* and the *Ayu* should not be thought till that time.<sup>x</sup>The various positioning of the planetary influences (*Graha*) in the horoscope of an individual can give

indication relating to his death. Even the death of the parents can be predicted based on the position and association of planetary influences especially Sun (*Surya*) and Moon (*Chandra*).<sup>xi</sup>

Another famous book on *Jyotisha Shastra* is *PrasnaMarga*. Detailed description about the topics on disease indicate by planets, Cause of death according to *PrasnaMarga*, features of short and long *Ayu*, *Arishta* related to dream (*Swapna*), auspicious sign (*Sakuna*) and messenger (*Doota*) obtained from this text.<sup>xii</sup>

### 3. SAMHITA KALA: (1000 BC - 600 AD)

Understanding of *Arishta Lakshanas* reaches its height during *Samhita kala*.

#### 1. *Charaka Samhita*: (2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> B.C.)

A separate section named *Indriya Sthana* is given that contains the knowledge of *Arishta Lakshanas* in twelve chapters. *Indriya Sthana* consist of the description of various death indicating signs and symptoms (*Arishta lakshanas*). In *Charaka Samhita*, *Arishta lakshanas* classified into two groups *Purushaashritabhava* (seen in person own) and *Purushaanashritabhav* (seen in surrounding)<sup>xiii</sup>. Some of the signs and symptoms are not apparent in a patient but can be observed in the surrounding of the patient. These are evaluated by logic based on scriptural instructions and inference. The factors not observed in patients are often circumstantial like an informer who comes with news of patient and the good/bad omens seen by the physician.

The *Prakriti* explained in *Indriya Sthana* is of six types<sup>xiv</sup>. It is very important to know the *Prakriti* of a person to understand the *Arishta*, as only after knowing the normal condition one will come to know the *Vikriti* and then only, he can understand that what *Arishta* is.

In *Charaka Samhita*, *Arishta* (Signs and symptoms of imminent death) are perceived by special changes in colour (*Varna*), sound (*Swara*), odour (*Gandha*), taste (*Rasa*), touch (*Sparsha*), complexion (*Chhaya*), and radiance (*Prabha*). *Charaka Samhita* also denotes *Arishta* that could be perceived by *Purvarupa* of disease, physical (*Bahyakarana*) and mental levels, with references to good / bad consequential happening (*Shakun*), messenger (*Doota*), dreams (*Swapna*) and other miscellaneous signs.

#### 2. *Susruta Samhita*: (3<sup>rd</sup> B.C.)

Total 7 *Adhyayas* of *Sutra Sthana* i.e. 23<sup>rd</sup> & 28<sup>th</sup> to 33<sup>rd</sup> are depicted about *Arishta*. It shows that *Arishta* can be perceived by special changes in colour (*Varna*), dream (*Swapana*), sensory (*Indriya*), complexion (*Chhaya*), behavior and *Avarana* (*updarava* of disease)<sup>xv</sup>.

*Susruta samhita* an authentic text on *Salya Tantra*, one can view the importance given to the knowledge of *Rishta Lakshana*, especially in surgical aspects like symptoms related to odour (*Gandha*), colour (*Varna*), voice (*Sabda*), touch (*Sparsha*) and structural changes (*Akriti*) in context of wound are mentioned. The features of curable (*Sadya*), (*Yapya*) and incurable (*Asadya*) wound are listed. Incurable symptoms include copious discharge, sprouts of soft muscles, exogenous wound (*Agantu Vrana*) with exudation of muscle fat, marrow or brain matter etc<sup>xvi</sup>. Even the *Yapya* type of wounds, if not treated properly it will result in the loss of one's life<sup>xvii</sup>.

### 3. *Ashtanga Samgraha* (6<sup>th</sup> Cent. A. D.)

*Vridha Vagbhat* denotes 4 consecutive chapters for *Arishta*. The contents are explained in the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> chapters of this Section. *Ashtanga samgraha* describes *Rishta* and the types of *Rishta* like- Incurable signs related to *Varna* (colour), *Chaya* (complexion), *Prabha* (radiance), fatal signs related with specific diseases, *Doota* (messenger) *Shakun* (omens) and *Swapna* (dreams). The ways to pacify the ill effects of dreams is also mentioned. He describes two types of *Arishta* i.e. stable (*Sthira*) and unstable (*Asthira*).<sup>xviii</sup> Here unstable type is not actually confirmed death sign but if person misunderstand / misinterpret as sign of near death. It is also known as *Rishtaabhasa* (impression of near-death sign). Unstable near-death sign occurs due to excessive aggravation of *Dosa*. While describing dreams, *Vagbhata* has mentioned that dreams seen by an ill person as well his relatives have significance in determining the *Arishta Lakshana*.

Though a separate section is not assigned, the clear and detailed information about death signs is incorporated in *Sharira Sthana* of this *Samhita*.

### 4. *Astanga Hridya*: (7<sup>th</sup> Cent. A. D.)

Likewise, *Ashtanga Samgraha Acharya* here also *Arishta Lakshanas* are described in *Sharira Sthana*.<sup>xix</sup> *Acharya Vagbhata* classified *Arishta* into two groups on the basis of stability i.e. Stable *Arishta* and Unstable *Arishta*. *Astanga Hridya* denotes *Arishta* like changes in various sensory perceptions like- appearance (*Rupa*), odour (*Gandha*), colour (*Varna*), Sensory (*Indriya*), complexion (*Chhaya*), nature (*Prakriti*). *Acharya Vagbhata* also denotes *Arishta* that could be perceived by disease specific severity and miscellaneous signs. The verses are almost the same as that in *Ashtanga Samgraha*.

### 5. *Kasyapa Samhita* (7<sup>th</sup> Cent. A. D.)

The 5<sup>th</sup> section of the *Samhita* is *Indriya Sthana*, of which a single chapter regarding death sign is available. The chapter is named *Oushada Bheshajeyam Indriyam* and starts with the classification of treatment into *Oushada* and *Bheshaja*.<sup>xx</sup>

*Acharya* has mentioned about the importance of understanding of *Rishta Lakshana* especially in children<sup>xxi</sup>.

Bad prognostic features and dreams are mentioned, which are much similar to the opinions of *Charaka* and *Susruta*. Being text of *Kaumarbhartiya* subject showing near death sign related to *Bala Graha* shown additionally<sup>xxii</sup>. Descriptions about specific *Indriya Arishta*, Features of messengers and omens are not mentioned but *Vyadhi Arishta* related *Bala Graha* are mentioned. Since only a very small portion relating to *Indriya Sthana* of *Kasyapa Samhita* is available, a complete picture of *Arishta Lakshana* could not be understood.

### 6. *Bhela Samhita*: (7<sup>th</sup> Cent. A. D.)

*Acharya Bhela* has followed *Caraka Samhita* regarding classification and details of *Arishta*.<sup>xxiii</sup> The *Indriya Sthana* of *Bhela Samhita* also contains the knowledge of *Arishta lakshanas* in twelve chapters. The *Indriya Sthana* of *Bhela Samhita* describes *Arishta lakshana* for various age groups, including children. It outlines diagnostic signs, predictions of longevity, characteristics, and attributes of individuals living up to a hundred years. Additionally, it delineates short-lived (*Alpayu*)<sup>xxiv</sup> and long-lived (*Deerghayu*)<sup>xxv</sup> *Lakshanas* are described.

Acharya Bhela has given details description of time related *Arishta* in his chapter 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>. In *Bhela Samhita* *Arishta* are explained in form of premonitory symptoms of disease, messenger, complexion, special changes in sensory organ and miscellaneous signs.

The layout of chapters and their names in *Bhela Samhita* bears certain similarities to *Charaka Samhita*, but the contents are not identical between the two texts. The arrangement of *Arishta Lakshanas* in this *Samhita* does not follow a specific order, likely due to the loss of certain parts of the original treatise, making it challenging to extract the exact meaning from some verses. Additionally, the text lacks explanations about omens, and there is limited information on premonitory symptoms or disease-related *Arishta Lakshanas*.

## 7. MEDIEVAL PERIOD (SAMGRAHA KALA): (8<sup>th</sup> cent. A. D. - 17<sup>th</sup> century A. D.)

### 1. *Harita Samhita*: (10-12<sup>th</sup> Cent. A.D.)

Description of *Arishta* is available in 2<sup>nd</sup> section of this text. It explains that disease appear in person due to his *karma* and its treatment remains in the form of charitable deeds.

The detailed description of *Arishta* in *Harita Samhita* includes aspects related to dreams, Complications, appearance, disease severity, senses, asterism (*Nakshatra*), messenger, and omen. Additionally, the text elaborates on the method of offering prayers to God in a holy fire (*Havan*) in its second section.<sup>xxvi</sup>

In this text, a more categorised layout is made regarding the sign and symptoms of impending death. Though a separate section has not been allotted to describe the symptoms related to death, a detailed picture of impending death can be obtained from this treatise. The facts related to *Arishta Lakshana* and *Jyotisha* are explained in a very simple and clear manner. *Harita Samhita* helps to understand aspects of *Arishta* including physical and mental faculties of a dying person, description of external factors such as messenger and analysis of astrological effects prior to therapy has also been emphasized in the text.

### 1. *Madhava Nidana*: (7<sup>th</sup> Cent. A.D.)

*Madhava Nidana* is a comprehensive, standard, indisputable and very popular work compiled by *Madhava* on etiology, pathogenesis, diagnosis, symptoms, Complications and *Arishta lakshana* of the diseases mentioned in *Charak Samhita*, *Susruta Samhita*, *Astanga Sangraha* of *Ayurveda*.

*Acharaya Madhava* has given incurable stage or bad prognosis of disease, separate chapters not mentioned in his text related to *Arishta lakshana*. He compiles *Aristha lakshana* in incurable sign of disease in his text.

### 2. *Sharangadhara Samhita* (13<sup>th</sup> cent.)

The brief description about factors relating to *Rishta Lakashana* in context of *Nadi* movement is found in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of *Prathama Khanda, Nadi Pareekshadi Vidhi*. This chapter contains topics related to examination of *Nadi* of a person, messenger, omens and dreams<sup>xxvii</sup>. The features of messenger and dreams which indicate health as well as disease or death is enumerated, which is similar to *Charaka Samhita*.

### 3. *Bhavaprakasha* (16<sup>th</sup> cent.)

Description of *Arishta* also found in this text<sup>xxviii</sup> There are similar to that of *Arishta laksana* told by *Acharya Susruta*. The *Rishta Lakshana* related to one's activities<sup>xxix</sup>, physical change<sup>xxx</sup>, treatment<sup>xxxi</sup> etc. are also mentioned. In this text, the author discusses about the importance in determining the lifespan of a patient before treatment, the bad prognosis signs and implication by the messenger.

#### 4. *Yoga Ratnakara*: (17<sup>th</sup> Cent. A.D.)

The *Arishta Lakshanas* are mentioned in the beginning of this *Samhita*. Certain particular contents mentioned under *Rishta*, which are not mentioned in i.e. *Arishta Lakshana* regarding *Nadi* (pulse), *Mala* (stool), *Mutra* (urine) and *Drik Pareeksha* (eye examination)<sup>xxxii</sup>.

#### 5. MODERN PERIOD (18<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D.- till now.)

##### Modern Medicine System-

In modern era, the inclusion of *Arishta laksanas* has been done in the form of near-death sign in contemporary medical system. It describes death as the cessation of all vital functions of the body including the heartbeat, brain activity and breathing. It is the terminations of all biological processes that sustain a living organism. They define it in terms of asphyxia, syncope and coma. In the present era, the wide spread of contemporary medicine, near death sign are mentioned in form of 11 major signs. When a person is terminally ill, they may be in hospital or receiving palliative care<sup>xxxiii</sup>. These signs are explored below.

1. Gradual cessation of appetite
2. Sleeping more
3. Becoming less social
4. Changing vital signs
5. Changing toilet habits
6. Weakening muscles
7. Dropping body temperature
8. Experiencing confusion
9. Changing breathing pattern
10. Increasing pain
11. Hallucinations

If a dying person is attached to a heart rate monitor, stoppage of the heart can be monitored.

Other signs of death include:

1. Not having a pulse
2. Not breathing
3. No muscle tensions
4. Eyes remaining fixed
5. Bowel or bladder releasing
6. Eyelids partially shut<sup>xxxiv</sup>



**In Ayurveda-**

In the modern era, *Rashtriya Ayurveda Vidyapeeth* arrange workshop programmed with initiate “Prognosis through *Arishta Lakshanas* and their scientific Basis” in March 2011. This workshop threw some light on the forgotten aspects of this branch (*Arishta*) of knowledge and encourage starting experiencing the prognostic features also while managing the patients<sup>xxxv</sup>.

In modern era a book with initiate “*Arista Vijana* (Prognostic methodology of Indian System of medicine- *Ayurveda*)” also a review work on *Arishta Lakshanas* from various *Samhita* and compare some *Arishta Lakshana* with modern medical science disease near death sign<sup>xxxvi</sup>.

**Conclusion-**

Over centuries, knowledge of impending death has been passed down through generation of practitioners, contributing to the development of comprehensive end of life care practices with in *Ayurveda*.

Start from *Vedic* era gradually development in various aspect of near-death sign found in various classical text. With the passage of time these sign and symptoms explanation become more and more patient oriented and practice based. Identifying this symptom enables prompt measures to relieve discomfort and offer palliative care. It aids in directing treatment plans and getting patients and their families ready for the unavoidable.

Furthermore, by acknowledging *Arishta lakshanas*, practitioners can address any unresolved emotional or spiritual issues, promoting an all-encompassing approach to ayurvedic end-of-life care.

Understanding these ancient signs not only enhances clinical practice but also opens avenues for future research into near-death signs and their implications.

***Arishta lakshana* in Various Textbook-**

Features	C.S.	S.S.	A.S.	A.H.	K.S.	H.S.	B.S.	Y.R.	B.P.	S.N.S.
1. <i>Indriya</i>	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	-
2. <i>Sharirika bhava</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-
3. <i>Manasika bhava</i>	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	-
4. <i>Vikara/ Vyadhi</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-
5. <i>Ahara- vihara</i>	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	-
6. <i>Bheshaja</i>	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	-
7. <i>Nadi</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+
8. <i>Mala</i>	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	-	-
9. <i>Mutra</i>	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	-	-
10. <i>Duta</i>	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+
11. <i>Sakuna</i>	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+
12. <i>Swapna</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+
13. <i>Jyotisha</i>	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-

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