

Rational of the fasting

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Preamble:

Vrata means to regulate food. Fasting on the days of Rituals is quite common in India. Ekadasi Day Fasting is important. It is also said that sins take form of or possess grain foods. Is there any rational in such statements of Puranas? Or is it irrational and arbitrary superstitious commandment?

Let us analyse this aspect with the lens of Vedic Jurisprudence.

- **Grains:** Grains symbolize the solid cooked food. (The expression of consuming sins is a metaphor, relative to the consumption period, such as Ekadashi. Nothing else.) In essence, the commandment is directed towards the staple food regularly consumed.
- **Fasting reminds** the body and mind constantly about a special purpose, apart from detoxification of the body, thru the uncooked food, water or beverages. Hence periodical fasting (fortnightly in this case), will achieve the twin purpose of conditioning the body as well as positioning the mind.
- **Now, coming to the aspect of mind:** When the mind is constantly reminded the starving cells of the body, about their needs, the mind responds by reminding itself about the specific purpose of veneration towards the Creator, Protector Almighty. In philosophical pursuit, it would also promote devotion and detachment.
- **Substitution to core food:** Stereotype food will make the body to consume to its capacity. However substitute food items will lessen the consumption. Hence, the fasting options range from nothing to nominal.
 - **First Level (Best Fasting)** Fasting without even Water
 - **Second Level:** Sustaining with Water
 - **Third Level:** Fruits, Uncooked vegetables, Liquid beverages such as Milk, Fruit Juice, Butter Milk, Semi Liquid Porridge
 - **Fifth Level:** Baked/ Cooked Roots, Oil Fry of full ground grains, half ground grains, mashed grains, half-baked grains (Saktu Powder, Pop-Corn, Beaten-Rice Etc.)
 - **Sixth Level:** Fried Grains before boiling Water, before consuming with other items. (Boiling the grains with water would qualify for full meals.)

These are the options given by the seers, to steer the body condition to first level from last level gradually. Full grains are the regular staple for one and all.

Hence, to desist from the staple food means, we are marking a change in our routine to signify the holiness, to make that a holy day. You may absolve that the term holiday is a derivative from the phrase holy day.

- **Fall out of non-observance:** As the natural lethargy drives the passions in the mind, it needs a counter balance. Hence, the scriptures put the barricades to consumption of staple food, by implying that food symbolizes sin on this day. In fact, non-sharing of food is always construed as a sin every day. This barricade naturally restricts the flow of appetite and satiates the mind with simple subsistence means.
- **Alternative Presentation in Vedic Rituals:**
 - उदरं वै वृत्रः, क्षुत् खलु वै मनुष्यस्य भ्रातृव्यः।
 - य एवं वेद हन्ति क्षुधं भ्रातृव्यम्।
 - वज्रो वै यज्ञः, क्षुत्खलु वै मनुष्यस्य भ्रातृव्यो, यदनाश्वानुपवसति- वज्रेणैव साक्षात्क्षुधं भ्रातृव्यं हन्ति। (यजुर्वेद तैत्तिरीय शाखा 1.6.6)

Stomach is the den of the Hunger – a feel of being deprived of energy. This feel is a sort of rival or enemy of every person, preventing any thought or work, until resolved. Therefore, Yajna (Ritual) is a sort of a powerful weapon to rein the feel.

Once, you have decided to skip food intake due to the ritualistic austerity, you will tend to be oblivious to the feel of hunger. This practice of fasting would vanquish the hunger in short term. In essence, the tendency to eat without reason and binge eating would stop by the virtue of fasting.

- **Metabolism View Point of Veda:** Apart from story narrative from Indra-Vrutra Episodes, the representation is quite interesting. Indra is the Soul (Jeevatma/ Prayagaatma). Vtutam – Feel of Hunger. Before the conflict, Vrutra offers to enter the body. Indra asked. (सन्धां तु सन्दधावहै, त्वां प्रविशेयमित्यब्रवीत्।) (तैत्तिरीय संहिता 2.4.12)
 - Indra – Why would you enter? (यन्मां प्रविशेः, किं मा भुञ्ज्या इत्यब्रवीत्।)
 - Vrutra – To enhance the Metabolism and Enliven you. (The Feel of Hunger is the indicator of Metabolism of living creatures.) (त्वामेवेन्धीय तव भोगाय त्वां प्रविशेयम् - इत्यब्रवीत्)
 - From this episode, we could gather that reduction of metabolic activity is also an objective of fasting. Rather than indulging in more physical activities increasing the metabolic rate, it is advised to give some respite to the physical activities to reduce energy consumption.

- **Fasting References from other Traditions of the world: Concept of Fasting** is not limited to Indian Ethos and Culture. We find many references in other religious texts too.
 - **In Buddhist Traditions** Asceticism, there are various optional ascetic practices named Dhutaṅga (literally shaking off the body to invigorate). Many monks, used to eat only one meal a day, as the practice is called Ekaashanika Anga. Another practice consists of only eating food collected on one's bowl during the daily alms round (Piṇḍapāta) during which monks go begging for food. If one happens to receive just a little food or not to receive any at all on one particular day, one would have to fast. Dhutaṅgas are seen as means to deepen one's spiritual practice, and to develop detachment from material things, including the body.
 - **Jewish tradition**, which stems from certain verses in the Torah, or the Jewish bible, stipulates that fasting on Yom Kippur is a necessary component of the day; **The verse in the Torah**, which can be found in **Leviticus 23:27**, states that the Day of Atonement should be one of "self-denial."
 - **Biblical References of Christianity:** Acts 13:2-3: "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."
 Bible (Old Testament, **Hebrew**) - From the Book of Isaiah 58:6: **רְצוּם מִשְׁאֲכָם קַרְץ פְּרָצוּ הַבָּלִים בְּפִסְחֵם תִּתְּנוּ לָחֶם עָנִי וְעֲרֵמִים תִּבְיֹא בֵּית כִּי תִרְאֶה עָרֹם וְכִסְיוֹ וּמִבְּשָׁרָךְ לֹא תִתְּעַלֵּם:**
 Bible (New Testament, **Greek**) - From the Gospel of Matthew 6:16-18: "Ὅταν δὲ νηστεύητε, μὴ γίνεσθε ὡς οἱ ὑποκριταί, σκυθρωποί: ἀφανίζουσιν γὰρ τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν, ὅπως φανῶσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύοντες. ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν. σὺ δὲ νηστεύων ἄλειψαι τὴν κεφαλὴν σου καὶ τὸ πρόσωπόν σου νίψαι, ἵνα μὴ φανῇ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύων ἀλλὰ τῷ πατρὶ σου τῷ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ: καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ἀποδώσει σοι.
 - **Islam Tradition has Ramadan** month fasting from dawn to dusk, which is widely known today's world. **Quran 2:183-185:** "O you who have believed, decreed upon you is fasting as it was decreed upon those before you that you may become righteous. [Fasting for] a limited number of days. So whoever among you is ill or on a journey [during them] - then an equal number of days [are to be made up]. And upon those who are able [to fast, but with hardship] - a ransom [as substitute] of feeding a poor person [each day]. And whoever volunteers excess - it is better for him. But to fast is best for you, if you only knew."
Quran (Arabic) - From Surah Al-Baqarah 2:183: "يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا" "كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ"

- **Concept of UpaVaasa:** Fasting is also called *Upavaasa*. (Upa= Near. Vasa= Dwelling.) UpaVaasa is to spend the stipulated time in proximity to divinity. Therefore, Fasting becomes the mean to achieve UpaVaasa. Therefore, the mean is named after the end. This is almost similar to naming convention of the world. The Avenue leading to the Temple is called **Temple Avenue**. Therefore, **fasting is called as UpaVaasa**, as this is the avenue to Spending More Time in Divine Sequences.
- **Conclusion:** Thus, the purpose of fasting is to keep the mind oriented towards the Almighty at least once a fortnight. Secondly reduction of consumption, leads to conservation of food ingredients, a scarce and vital element for our sustenance.

Let us see the irony of over consumption *vis-a-vis* malnutrition in different parts of the globe). Early adoption of this habit will also inculcate this sense among children to avoid child obesity and subsequent morbidity in later life. Child Obesity is assuming the proportions of epidemic in several so-called developed parts of the world. Inculcating the habit of regular fasting would help address the problem of morbid obesity, in physical sense apart from the spiritual benefits whatsoever.

Shubham.