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FASTING - A MEDICO HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

*S. Natarajan**, *M. Kannan[^]*, *P. Sathiyarajeswaran[^]*, *K. Gopakumar^{^^}*,
S. Jega Jothi Pandian^{^^}, *R.S. Ramaswamy^{**}*

** Corresponding Author,*

** Consultant (Varmam Therapy), Siddha Regional Research Institute, Puducherry*

[^] Research Officer, Siddha Central Research Institute, Chennai

[^] Research Officer – Scientist II, Central Council for Research in Siddha, Chennai

*** Director General, Central Council for Research in Siddha, Chennai*

ABSTRACT:

Fasting is act of abstain from food or any drink for a particular time following certain rules. This paper gives a glimpse about the act of fasting in previous era, how each religion handles the act of fasting especially by Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Jainism. It details about its therapeutic benefits mentioned in Siddha system of medicine and its contra indications. It also show a snapshot of the researches on fasting.

KEYWORDS: Fasting, Siddha Medicine, Religious fasting

1. INTRODUCTION

Fasting is willing abstinence from food inclusive of any drink for a period of time adopting certain regulations. Fasting has been practiced from time immemorial by the humans. In the evolution of mankind, human race gained knowledge by their own experience towards food, fire, utensils and cloths. In this instance the act of fasting is inevitable as they are not aware of foods which are to be eaten and which is to be avoided. Food is the primary aim of earlier man and food plays a major role even today in day today activities. Restricting food is considered to be either punishment or offering. In the evolution of humankind fasting is performed as an offering to god. Fasting is also to cleanse both body and mind. In the field of medicine a fasting and diet restriction plays a major role.

2. HISTORY OF FASTING

Fasting can be traced throughout the evolution of humankind. It is tainted with religious concepts after inception of community life styles. In ancient times fasting was being conducted as a ritual on the occasion of death or rebirth. In this context all the kings were observed fasting before their sworn ceremony. It is assumed that it a cleansing part by which the sacred forces will accommodate the individual. The olden days concept of fasting focuses the purification procedure.

Almost all the religions adopted this act of fasting to pay their devotion. The four main religions adopted this fasting are hinduism, chirstianism, jainism and islam

3. HINDUISM

Fasting is an integral part of Hindu religion. There are different kinds of fasting procedure for each god and goddess. Individuals observe different kinds of fasts based on personal beliefs and local customs. Fasting during religious festivals is also very common.

Common examples are Maha Shivaratri, the nine days of Navratri during Vijayadashami and the six days of Kanta shasti viratam.

Shiva ratri fasting is one of the important fast devoted to Lord Shiva. One who fasts with sincerity, devotion and love will be blessed with grace of lord Shiva. On Shivaratri Festival, many go on a diet of fruits and milk, some do not consume even a drop of water all through the day and night. Hindu Mythology states that if a devotee observes Shiva ratri fast with discipline it will controls the quality of passionate activity and quality of inertia. It will also help in settle down the lust, anger and jealousy¹.

Fasting is being observed by Hindus in certain days like Ekadesi, Pradosha, purnima etc. Certain days of the week are also set aside for fasting depending on personal belief and favorite deity. For example, devotees of Shiva tend to fast on Mondays, while devotees of Vishnu tend to fast on Fridays or Saturdays.

Kanta Shasti Vratam is observed paying devotion to Lord Murugan for six days once a year in the month of 'Aippasi' (October–November) starting from the 'piratamai' the 1st phase of the brightening moon².

4. ISLAM

Ramadan is mentioned as a holy month in Quran which guides mankind about holy and evil things. It also specifies the period of days to be fasted in this month. It is also emphasized every Muslim to fast in this month after confirmed sight of new moon. The coming on of Ramadan is confirmed in one of two ways: 1) either through direct sight of the new moon if the sky is clear; 2) or, if it is cloudy, and in this case the new moon cannot be seen, by counting 30 days for Sha'ban (the month before Ramadan), after which fasting is then started³.

Suhoor refers to the meal consumed early in the morning before fasting, sawm, in daylight hours during the Islamic month of Ramadan. The meal is eaten before the sun rises, and

before the fajr or dawn prayer. Suhoor as the morning meal is matched by Iftar as the evening meal, during Ramadan, replacing the traditional three meals a day (breakfast, lunch and dinner).

5. JAINISM

Fasting is also common in Jainism and its festival. Prayushan is one of the important festival lasts for 8 days during which most of the Jains fasts. But no time is specific for fasting. To overcome the mistakes done by an individual fasting is also observed. Mahavir emphasizes that fasting purifies body and mind. Fasting is abstinence of food and the desire towards the food should be controlled. Control over the mind is the concept behind the fasting in Jainism.

There are several fasts in Jainism like Complete fasting (No food or water for a period), Partial fasting (Eating less than you desire and to simply avoid hunger), Vruti Sankshep (Limiting the number of items eaten), Rasa Parityag (Giving up favourite foods), Great fasts (Some monks fast for months at a time, following Mahavir, who fasted for over 6 months).

Different types of fast observed in Jainism are Choviyharo Upavas (To give up food and water for the whole day), Upavas (To give up only food for the whole day), Digamber Upvas (One may drink water only once a day, before sunset), Shwetamber Upvas (One may drink Water after Porsi which is boiled and then cooled naturally, provided this is done before sunset), Ekasan (To eat one meal a day at one sitting and drink water as desired between sunrise and sunset), Beasan (To eat two meals a day, (one meal per sitting) and drink water any times between sunrise and sunset), Ayambil (Eating food once in one sitting. The food is spice free and boiled or cooked, without milk, curds, ghee, oil, or green/raw vegetables), Chathth (To give up both food and water or only food continuously for two days), Aththam (To give up food and water or only food continuously for three days), Aththai (To give up food and water or only food continuously for eight days), Masaksaman (To give up food and water or only food continuously for a whole month), Navkarsi (Food and water is consumed forty-eight (48) minutes after sunrise. The orthodox brush teeth and rinse mouths only after sunrise), Porsi (Taking food

and water three hours after sunrise), Sadh-porsi (Taking food and water four hours and thirty minutes after sunrise), Purimuddh (Taking food and water six hours after sunrise), Avadhhdh (Taking food and water eight hours after sunrise), Tivihar (After sunset no food or juice shall be taken, but one may drink water. Many Jains practise this daily), Navapad oli (During every year for 9 days starting from the 6/7th day in the bright fortnight until the full moon day in Ashwin and Chaitra months, one does Ayambil. This is repeated for the next four and half years. Ayambils may be restricted to one kind of grain per day. Other austerities are varshitap, Vardhaman, and visasthanak tap, etc), Santhara (To give up food and water entirely. This leads to death and is undertaken by someone who has finished all his/her duties and wishes to leave this world peacefully. It gives control over when one dies so everything may be completed and a person may leave of his/her own free will)⁴.

6. CHIRSTIANISM

Fasting is being observed in Christianity during the eve of Good Friday in the remembrance of Jesus Chirst. It is to abstain meat in the food during this eve. It defines as one meal a day or two smaller meals which should not exceed the main meal in quantity. It is also emphasized that individuals of age between 18 and 59 will be allowed to fast on this eve. Sick people, pregnant women, old age people and psychiatric illness patients are exempted for observing fast.

There are number quotes in the Holy Bible mentioning about the observance of fasting. Some of them are 1. Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights, twice back-to-back, without food or water; the first, immediately before he received the tablets on the mountain with God. And the second, after coming down, seeing the Israelites practicing idolatry, and breaking the tablets in anger. (Deuteronomy 9:7-21) 2. King David fasted when the son of his adulterous union with Bathsheba was struck sick by God, in punishment for the adultery and for David's murder of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite. Nevertheless, the son died, upon which David broke his fast (2 Samuel 12:15-25). 3. King Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast throughout Judah for

victory over the Moabites and Ammonites who were attacking them (2 Chronicles 20:3). 4.The prophet Joel called for a fast to avert the judgment of God. The people of Nineveh, in response to Jonah's prophecy, fasted to avert the judgment of God (Jonah 3:7).

5.The Jews of Persia, following Mordechai's example, fasted because of the genocidal decree of Haman. Queen Esther declared a three-day fast for all the Jews prior to risking her life in visiting King Ahasuerus uninvited (Esther 4). 6. Saul, later Paul, did not eat or drink anything for three days after he converted on the road to Damascus. Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights while in the desert, being tempted by Satan to turn stones into bread and eat them, among other temptations. (Matthew 4:2, Luke 4:2). 7. The prophetess Anna, who proclaimed the baby Jesus to be the Messiah, prayed and fasted regularly in the Temple (Luke 2:37). 8. There are indications in the New Testament as well as from the Didache that members of an Early Christian Church fasted regularly. Jesus teaches on the outward appearance and demeanor of a fasting person (Matthew 6:16). 9. It is also an assumed action of the believer (see: "And when you pray..." Matthew 6:5 - "When you fast..." Matthew 6:16) David used fasting as an act of humbling his soul (Psalm 35:13). 10. The church in Antioch were worshipping the Lord and fasting when the Holy Spirit told them to send Barnabas and Saul for work (Acts 13:2). 11. Paul and Barnabus appointed elders with prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23)⁵.

7. SIDDHA MEDICINE ON FASTING

Siddha system of Medicine postulates fasting with methodological pattern. According to Siddha, fasting is an effective way to kindle the digestive fire (Agni) and burn away accumulated toxins from the body. Siddha emphasize not to abstain from food or water for extended period of time which depletes bodily tissues leading to doshic imbalance. It states the duration of fasting, contraindication of excessive fasting, foods to be taken after fasting, whom to avoid fasting and the diseases in which it should be adopted.

Siddha system classifies the fasting as short term fasting, regular Fasting, long term fasting, infrequent fasting. Instructions are clearly spelled out how to adopt fasting, rules to be adopted for fasting, which disease fasting should be adopted, duration of the fasting.

One must consider the following things such as the clinical condition of the patient, rules to be adopted, habitat of the place. It should not exceed more than 25 days. Siddhars categorize the period of fasting from best to worst. Fasting below one day is best, for 5 days is better, for 10 days is worse and more than 10 days is worst.

The foods to be administered after fasting are lavangam, thipili, thinai, samai, ragi, varuhu, rice, salt, tamarind, kadugu and koll should be avoided⁶.

7.1. CONTRADICTIONS OF EXCESSIVE FASTING

Tiredness, nausea, excessive sleep, thirst, vomiting, cough, dyspnea, hiccup, fever with weight loss, anger, depression and fear.

7.2. WHOM TO AVOID FASTING

Siddhars pointed out pregnant woman, infants, children, Alcoholics, persons with excessive sexual indulgence, persons with diseases like eye disorders, tuberculosis, pitha disease, diarrhea, dysentery and horse and elephant riders should avoid fasting

8. RESEARCH ON FASTING

Fasting enhances the efficacy of chemotherapy^{7,8,9}. Intermittent fasting has potential effects in mice than caloric restricted diets¹⁰. Intermittent fasting shows good results in human trials¹¹. Fasting has good benefits on stress resistance, increased insulin sensitivity, morbidity and increased life span¹². Short term human trials showed benefits in weight loss¹³. Intermittent fasting will increase life span¹⁴. Fasting also showed reduction in lipid profile particularly LDL

cholesterol^{15,16}. There is no evidence on fasting in cancer patients, but in animal study showed the reduction in lymphoma¹⁷.

9. CONCLUSION

Fasting has travelled many years from its invention. It is now being practiced by many of the people in faith of religious myth. This act has been adopted by all the religion irrespective of their path highlights the importance of fasting for human being. It is not a merely an act of abstain of food it detoxifies our body and mind. It acts a therapeutic agent if observed with strict regulations. It should be educated in younger generation about the importance of fasting to get a hail and health younger generation.

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