

# The spirit of fasting: Loosening some ties

Fasting provides opportunity to practice real simplicity, humility and social solidarity



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**T**he season of fasts is here - Navratri's nine days of fasting has just begun among Hindus, while Muslims have been fasting for the entire month of Ramjan. The Jain community which began fasting last month pursue various fasts - all ranging from a few days to an entire year — with restraints of a few grains to complete fast without food and in some cases even water! Perhaps, Jains have the most rigorous and self-denying fasting practices. Christianity, and all other religions too have some or the other regimen of fasting.

Why would almost every cultural community take recourse to voluntary denial of comfort, food, water and/or other utilities? I will not get into its spiritual and socio-cultural significance — maybe I am not competent enough to delve into that. But, I will like to share some thoughts about an experiment that was recently started with the help of many institutions, colleagues, Jain doctors' networks and Defence Institute of Physiology and Allied Sciences (DIPAS). The precursor of this study was Dr Sudhir Shah's study of long duration fasting by a few revered individuals. More on that later...

We have all been hearing about climate change and are trying to cope with the consequences in short and long term. I will discuss next time, the examples of how different communities have evolved capacity and creative ways to cope with the risks associated with climate change. The role of fasting in dealing with climate change is profound. If certain crops become vulnerable to unexpected

disease or pest or other stresses (such as a medium-term dry spell this year), or gets exposed to other natural disasters, communities may have to develop capacity to manage with little that they have, till the time relief or some other succour can be reached to the affected people. Periodic fasting increases our resilience. But are some communities or individuals better at this capacity. Can this capacity be enhanced? Are there lessons that our defence forces can learn and thus prepare our soldiers to deal with unavoidable stresses in extreme situations? It is a well known fact that more than the lack of food, it is the pangs of hunger which become unbearable for people not used to fasting. Does mind help in guiding the body to deal with these situations in ways that science has not yet understood? Gandhiji used fasting as a weapon of social protest. By hurting himself, he



**The Jain community ends their eight-day fast (Atthai).**

imposed guilt on the larger society and often succeeded in inducing larger social change. In the recent times, Shastri ji gave a call after war, drought and food shortages of sixties (and sanctions by food aid providers) and the whole nation started foregoing cereals on Monday evening.

Fasting may strengthen our

moral fibre too and that is for those who practice it more regularly to write about. We are also going to study in due course special significance of

## **MINDS ON THE MARGIN**

naturally chosen 'fast foods' (not the junk foods, but those which different cultures specially encourage or permit during fasting periods). Many of these are nutraceuticals and high energy foods. I hope some meditation during fasting will also help us develop solidarity with those who have to suffer involuntary fasting because they cannot afford food. I wish everybody happy fasting season and hope that each one of us will try to be more compassionate towards those who are different from us, whether because of faith or region or economic conditions or any other factor. Will not fasting thus enable us to loosen the ties with feelings and beliefs which come in the way of practicing real simplicity, humility and social solidarity? Let Navratri raise these questions in our mind every day.