



Review Article

NAVARATRI: A DEEP DIVE INTO ANCIENT WISDOM, MODERN FASTING AND THE RHYTHMS OF *RITUSANDHI*

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ABSTRACT

Navratri, a biannual Hindu festival dedicated to Goddess Durga, transcends religious observance to embody a sophisticated system of seasonal adaptation. Deeply rooted in Ayurvedic principles, it aligns human physiology with nature's rhythms during critical transitional periods known as *Ritu Sandhi*. **Objective:** To explore the ancient Ayurvedic wisdom embedded in Navratri's fasting practices and examine their relevance and parallels to modern health trends such as intermittent fasting, metabolic health and holistic well-being. **Methods:** A thematic analysis of Ayurvedic texts and principles related to *Agni, Ama* and *Dosha* balance was undertaken. This was contextualized with the traditional Navratri dietary regimen and juxtaposed with modern scientific literature on fasting, gut health and metabolic regulation. **Results:** Seasonal Adaptation: Navratri occurs during equinoxes times of heightened physiological vulnerability mirroring *Ritu Sandhi* in Ayurveda, when lifestyle adjustments are crucial i.e., Fasting and *Agni, Sattvic* diet, modern parallels, *Dosha*-specific benefits. **Conclusion:** Navratri offers a comprehensive, time-tested health strategy rooted in Ayurvedic wisdom. Its practices foster not just physical detoxification but spiritual and emotional recalibration. In an age of fragmented wellness approaches, Navratri exemplifies a harmonious, holistic model for seasonal health, mindful living and deep ecological integration.

INTRODUCTION

Navratri, a revered Hindu festival observed twice annually, transcends mere religious observance to embody a profound system of seasonal adaptation and internal purification. Navaratri, meaning "nine nights," is a Hindu festival celebrated with immense fervour across India and by the diaspora globally.^[1] More than just a religious observance dedicated to the Goddess Durga, it embodies a profound understanding of human physiology, seasonal transitions and spiritual well-being, deeply rooted in the ancient science of Ayurveda. Coinciding precisely with the equinoxes, these nine-night periods offer an ancient, yet remarkably relevant, framework for aligning human physiology with natural cycles.

This article explores Navratri's timeless wisdom of fasting, its deep roots in Ayurvedic principles and its compelling parallels with contemporary health practices. In an age where modern wellness trends like intermittent fasting are gaining traction, Navaratri offers a compelling historical and philosophical precedent, presenting a holistic "preceptive" approach to health that aligns remarkably with contemporary scientific discoveries, particularly when examined through the lens of *Ritusandhi*.^[2]

As the vibrant hues of spring and autumn paint the Indian subcontinent, the air hums with an ancient energy the spirit of Navratri. More than just a festival, Navratri is a profound spiritual journey, a celebration of the Divine Feminine and remarkably, a remarkably prescient practice of seasonal fasting deeply rooted in the wisdom of Ayurveda. In today's fast-paced world, where health trends come and go, understanding the "why" behind Navratri's traditional fasting offers a

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powerful lens through which to view modern health practices.

AIM

To investigate the health, physiological and spiritual significance of Navratri fasting through the lens of Ayurveda and to explore its parallels with modern fasting practices, particularly during seasonal transitions (*Ritu Sandhi*) as a model for holistic health and disease prevention.

OBJECTIVES

1. To analyse the Ayurvedic basis of Navratri and its strategic timing during *Ritu Sandhi*.
2. To examine the physiological and spiritual purposes of Navratri fasting and its influence on *Agni*, *Ama* and *Dosha* balance.
3. To explore the components of the traditional Navratri sattvic diet and its role in detoxification and immunity.
4. To compare ancient Ayurvedic fasting practices with modern scientific paradigms such as intermittent fasting, autophagy and metabolic flexibility.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials

- Classical Ayurvedic texts (*Charaka Samhita*, *Ashtanga Hridaya*) for concepts of *Agni*, *Ama*, *Ritu Sandhi* and *Dosha* theory.
- Traditional Navratri dietary practices and guidelines followed in various Indian regions.
- Contemporary scientific literature on intermittent fasting, autophagy, metabolic health and gut physiology. Ethnographic and cultural data on Navratri rituals and their health implications.

Methods

Literature Review: Comparative analysis of Ayurvedic doctrines and contemporary medical research regarding seasonal adaptation and fasting benefits.

Thematic Analysis: Identification of core themes such as digestive health, detoxification, metabolic regulation and mind-body-spirit integration.

Cultural Contextualization: Integration of traditional practices and their socio-religious roles within the Indian context.

Comparative Framework: Mapping parallels between Navratri fasting and modern wellness practices to assess convergence and divergence.

DISCUSSION

The celebration of Navratri represents a multifaceted convergence of ritual, seasonal awareness, dietary discipline, and spiritual introspection. In Ayurveda, *Ritu Sandhi* the transition

between seasons is recognized as a vulnerable period where bodily imbalances are likely to occur. Navratri's biannual observance during these transitions is therefore not incidental but a deliberate, ancient strategy for internal recalibration. The practice of fasting during Navratri serves a dual function: physiological detoxification and spiritual purification. Ayurvedic principles highlight the weakening of *Agni* during seasonal change, which compromises digestion and can lead to *Ama* accumulation. Fasting offers a reset, enabling the body to eliminate toxins, strengthen immunity and enhance metabolic functions. Moreover, the *Sattvic* diet prescribed during Navratri comprising light, nourishing, seasonal food facilitates this process by easing the digestive load and fostering mental clarity.

The avoidance of *Rajasic* and *Tamasic* substances supports emotional stability and spiritual receptivity, promoting holistic well-being.^[3] Modern scientific research validates these ancient practices. Intermittent fasting and time-restricted eating, for example, are known to improve insulin sensitivity, reduce inflammation and trigger autophagy. These findings echo Ayurveda emphasis on the importance of digestive rest and cellular renewal.

What sets Navratri apart is its integrative approach fasting is not merely physical but is woven into a broader spiritual framework involving prayer, meditation and devotion. This cultivates discipline, self-awareness and emotional resilience, reflecting Ayurveda core philosophy of balance across body, mind and spirit.

The festival's alignment with the solar-lunar calendar and equinoxes reflects a deep understanding of circadian and seasonal biology, centuries ahead of modern chrono medicine. Hence, Navratri emerges as not just a cultural event but a sophisticated, ancient wellness protocol that remains profoundly relevant in today's fragmented health landscape.

Navratri: The Rhythm of Nature's Transition

Observed twice a year as *Chaitra* Navratri in the spring (March-April) and *Sharad* Navratri in the autumn (September-October) this nine-night festival coincides precisely with pivotal seasonal junctures. These are periods when nature undergoes significant shifts, and consequently, our bodies too, experience a subtle but discernible change in their physiological rhythm. Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, emphasizes that these transitional periods are particularly susceptible to imbalances if we don't adjust our lifestyle and diet accordingly.

Ritu Sandhi: The Crucial Seasonal Junctions

In Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, *Ritu Sandhi* refers to the sensitive

transitional periods between two seasons. Each *Ritu Sandhi* spans 14 days, comprising the last 7 days of the outgoing season and the first 7 days of the incoming season.^[4] During these critical junctures, the environment undergoes significant changes in temperature, humidity, and overall qualities, which directly impact the human body. Ayurveda teaches that our digestive fire (*Agni*) tends to be weaker during *Ritu Sandhi*, making us more susceptible to *Dosha* imbalances (*Vata*, *Pitta*, *Kapha*) and the accumulation of toxins (*Ama*). This increased vulnerability to illness, often manifesting as colds, coughs or digestive issues, is precisely why traditional practices like Navratri fasting are observed during these times to allow the body to gently cleanse, rebalance and adapt to the new seasonal energies, thereby preventing disease and promoting overall well-being.

The Cosmic Dance of Seasons: Navratri's Strategic Timing

Navratri, meaning "nine nights," unfolds biannually, perfectly synchronizing with the equinoxes:

- **Chaitra Navratri (Spring- March/April):** As winter's cold grip loosens and the world reawakens, this Navratri ushers in new life. The body, having endured the heavier, denser foods of winter, needs to shed its accumulated sluggishness.^[5]
- **Sharad Navratri (Autumn- September/October)** Following the intensity of summer's heat, this Navratri prepares the body for the cooler, drier energies of winter. It's a time to cleanse lingering heat and bolster immunity for the seasonal shift.^[6]

Ayurveda, the "science of life," intricately maps human health to these natural cycles. It posits that seasonal transitions (known as *Ritu Sandhi*) are periods of vulnerability, where the body's innate intelligence or *Dosha* (*Vata*, *Pitta*, *Kapha*) are prone to imbalance. These imbalances can manifest as digestive disturbances, weakened immunity and a general feeling of dis-ease. Navratri's timing is not arbitrary; it's a profound recognition of these physiological vulnerabilities, offering a structured pathway to restore equilibrium.

Ayurveda's Foundational Principles: Fasting as a Therapeutic Art

At the heart of Ayurvedic wisdom lies the concept of *Agni*, our digestive fire. A strong *Agni* is paramount for optimal health, ensuring proper digestion, assimilation of nutrients and the elimination of waste. During *Ritu Sandhi*, *Agni* tends to weaken, making the body susceptible to *Ama* undigested food matter that ferments and becomes toxic, clogging channels and leading to disease.

Navratri fasting, far from being a mere act of self-denial, is a sophisticated therapeutic intervention designed to:

1. **Rest and Rejuvenate *Agni*:** By reducing the load on the digestive system, *Agni* can rekindle its strength, becoming more efficient in processing food.
2. **Eliminate *Ama*:** When digestion is optimized, the body can naturally begin to burn off accumulated toxins, leading to detoxification at a cellular level.
3. **Balance *Dosha*:** The specific dietary choices made during Navratri directly impact the three *Dosha*, bringing them back into harmony.

The Sattvic Plate of Navratri: A Blueprint for Purity and Balance

The traditional Navratri diet is a masterclass in *Sattvic* (pure, harmonious, and clarifying) eating, consciously avoiding *Rajasic* (stimulating) and *Tamasic* (dull, heavy, and decaying) foods. Key components include:

- **Fresh Fruits and Seasonal Vegetables:** These are rich in *Prana* (life force), enzymes, vitamins and fibre, providing gentle nourishment and promoting elimination. Think papaya, apples, gourds, pumpkin and spinach.
- **Specific Grains and Flours:** Instead of common wheat and rice, the focus shifts to easily digestible alternatives like:
 - ❖ **Kuttu (Buckwheat):** Despite its name, it's not a true wheat and is gluten-free, rich in protein and fibre.
 - ❖ **Singhara Atta (Water Chestnut Flour):** Light, cooling and easily digested, often used for flatbreads and savouries.
 - ❖ **Rajgira Atta (Amaranth Flour):** A pseudo-grain, highly nutritious, protein-rich and gluten-free.
 - ❖ These choices are strategically chosen to support a gentler digestive process during the transitional period.
- **Dairy Products:** Milk, fresh yogurt, and paneer (homemade Indian cheese) provide essential protein and healthy fats, aiding in satiety without being overly heavy.
- **Minimal and Specific Spices:** Over-stimulating spices are avoided. Instead, focus is on:
 - ❖ **Rock Salt (*Sandhav Lavana*):** Believed to be purer and easier to digest than regular table salt.
 - ❖ **Cumin, Green Cardamom, Ginger:** These are mild, digestive aids that enhance flavour without overwhelming *Agni*.
- **Exclusion of *Rajasic* and *Tamasic* Foods:** This is a cornerstone. Meat, eggs, onions, garlic, alcohol, and processed foods are strictly avoided. This promotes mental clarity, emotional calm, and prevents the

accumulation of toxins that these foods can generate, especially when *Agni* is suboptimal.

- This mindful dietary approach allows the digestive system to rest and reset, enabling the body to naturally cleanse and detoxify. It strengthens *Agni*, improves nutrient absorption and boosts overall immunity, preparing the body for the upcoming season.

This meticulously curated diet supports the body's natural cleansing mechanisms, improves cellular function, and prepares the immune system for the challenges of the new season.

Modern Fasting and its Connection to Navratri's Principles

In contemporary health discourse, various forms of fasting, such as intermittent fasting, time-restricted eating, and extended fasts, have gained significant traction. While often framed through a scientific lens of autophagy, metabolic flexibility, and insulin sensitivity, it's fascinating to observe the parallels with Navratri's ancient wisdom.

- **Resting the Digestive System:** Modern fasting protocols, at their core, aim to give the digestive system a break, much like the Navratri fast. This

allows the body to redirect energy towards repair and rejuvenation.

- **Mindful Eating:** Many modern fasting advocates emphasize mindful eating during feeding windows, focusing on whole, unprocessed foods a principle inherent in the sattvic diet of Navratri.
- **Detoxification and Cellular Repair:** The concept of "autophagy" in modern science, where the body cleans out damaged cells, mirrors the Ayurvedic idea of eliminating *Ama* and promoting cellular renewal through fasting.
- **Improved Metabolic Health:** Both traditional Navratri fasting and modern intermittent fasting contribute to better blood sugar regulation and improved metabolic health by enhancing insulin sensitivity.

However, a key distinction lies in the holistic approach of Navratri. It's not just about the physical act of fasting but also about the spiritual discipline meditation, prayer and self-reflection which adds a powerful dimension of mental and emotional cleansing, often overlooked in purely physiological modern fasting trends.

Effect of Fasting on *Agni* and Digestive Process

Aspect	Ayurveda (<i>Agni</i> Perspective)	Modern Science (Digestive Enzymes & Process)	Effect of Fasting
Primary Concept	<i>Agni</i> is the fire responsible for digestion, metabolism and transformation	Digestive enzymes are secreted to break down food into absorbable units	Fasting gives both systems rest and promotes efficiency
<i>Agni</i> /Enzyme Activity at rest	During fasting, <i>Agni</i> is conserved and rekindled	Enzyme production decreases due to absence of food stimulus	Conserves energy; prepares body for better response when re-fed
Toxin removal (<i>Ama</i>)	Fasting burns <i>Ama</i> (toxins) and strengthens <i>Agni</i>	Detoxification processes are activated; autophagy is promoted	Enhances internal cleansing and digestive readiness
Metabolic efficiency	Improved metabolic fire leads to better digestion post-fast	Improved insulin sensitivity and gut enzyme function post-fast	Fasting resets metabolism and digestive health
Overburden relief	Gives <i>Agni</i> a break from constant processing of food	Reduces gastrointestinal workload and inflammation	Restores balance and prevents digestive exhaustion
Gastrointestinal rhythm	Fasting realigns <i>Agni</i> with circadian rhythms	Enzyme secretion re-sensitizes to proper mealtimes	Promotes natural digestive cycle and appetite regulation
Enzyme production rebound	<i>Agni</i> becomes sharper after fasting	Digestive enzyme secretion improves post-fast due to increased demand	Enhances digestive capability post fasting
Therapeutic benefit	Used to treat diseases of weak <i>Agni</i> (indigestion, heaviness etc)	Used in clinical settings for metabolic disorders and digestive issues	Therapeutic fasting restores digestive strength and reduces symptoms

Navigating the Seasons: An Ayurvedic Imperative

Ayurveda continually reminds us that we are microcosms of the macrocosm. Just as nature transitions, so do we. Ignoring these shifts can lead to seasonal ailments. Navratri, therefore, serves as an annual reminder to align ourselves with these natural rhythms.

- **Spring (Chaitra Navratri):** As winter's heaviness gives way to spring, the body tends to accumulate *Kapha* (earth and water element), leading to sluggishness, allergies, and colds. The light, purifying foods of Chaitra Navratri help to balance *Kapha* and prepare the body for the warmer months.
- **Autumn (Sharad Navratri):** After the heat of summer, *Pitta* (fire and water element) can be elevated, leading to acidity, inflammation, and skin issues. The cooling and gentle nature of Sharad Navratri foods helps to pacify *Pitta* and strengthen immunity for the approaching winter.

Modern Fasting Paradigms: Echoes of Ancient Wisdom

The contemporary health landscape abounds with various fasting methodologies, often championed for their scientific benefits. It's striking how many of these align with the underlying principles of Navratri:

- **Intermittent Fasting (IF) & Time-Restricted Eating (TRE):** Both emphasize periods of caloric restriction, giving the digestive system a much-needed break. This mirrors Navratri's principle of reducing the burden on *Agni*. Scientific studies on IF highlight benefits like improved insulin sensitivity, reduced inflammation and enhanced cellular repair mechanisms.^[7]
- **Autophagy:** This buzzword in modern science refers to the body's natural process of "self-eating," where it cleans out damaged cells and regenerates new ones.⁸ The prolonged digestive rest during Navratri fasting would inherently trigger and enhance this powerful cellular detoxification process, a concept instinctively understood by ancient Ayurvedic practitioners as the elimination of *Ama*.
- **Metabolic Flexibility:** The ability of the body to efficiently switch between burning carbohydrates and fats for fuel is a key benefit of modern fasting. By depleting glycogen stores, Navratri's carbohydrate-controlled diet would naturally encourage fat burning, improving metabolic flexibility and energy stability.^[9]
- **Gut Health:** Giving the gut a rest allows the beneficial bacteria to flourish and the gut lining to repair, leading to improved nutrient absorption and

a stronger immune system a direct consequence of a healthy *Agni* and reduced *Ama*.^[10]

- **Mind-Body Connection:** While modern fasting often focuses purely on physiological outcomes, Navratri integrates the mental and spiritual dimensions. The discipline of fasting, coupled with meditation, prayer, and self-reflection, cultivates mental clarity, emotional balance and a deeper connection to oneself, reinforcing the Ayurvedic concept of holistic health where mind, body and spirit are inextricably linked.^[11]

Navigating the Seasonal Flux: An Ayurvedic Imperative

Ayurveda continually emphasizes that we are intrinsically connected to our environment. Neglecting the rhythms of nature can lead to disease. Navratri, therefore, is not merely a ritual but a vital preventative health strategy tailored to the specific challenges of each seasonal transition:

- **Spring (Chaitra Navratri):** As winter melts into spring, the accumulated *Kapha dosha* (characterized by heaviness, coldness, and stickiness) can manifest as congestion, allergies, lethargy, and a propensity for colds. The light, warming, and purifying foods of Chaitra Navratri (like kuttu, ginger, and light vegetables) help to liquefy and eliminate excess *Kapha*, invigorating the body and strengthening it against spring ailments.
- **Autumn (Sharad Navratri):** The intense heat of summer can aggravate *Pitta dosha* (fire and water elements), leading to inflammation, acidity, skin eruptions and irritability. The cooling and gentle nature of Sharad Navratri foods (such as gourds, cooling fruits and simple dairy) helps to pacify elevated *Pitta*, cleanse the blood and build immunity for the approaching winter, which can be challenging for *Vata dosha* (air and ether elements).

CONCLUSION

Weaving Ancient Wisdom into Modern Living

Navratri's traditional fasting, understood through the sophisticated lens of Ayurveda, presents a powerful, holistic paradigm for health and well-being. It's a living testament to humanity's ancient understanding of its place within the natural world and the profound impact of seasonal shifts on our physiology. While contemporary scientific research continues to validate many of these age-old practices, Navratri offers more than just physiological benefits; it provides a framework for spiritual growth, mindful living and a deeper connection to self. In an increasingly frenetic and often disconnected world, where overconsumption and environmental disconnect are rampant, embracing the spirit of Navratri whether through full religious observance or

by selectively incorporating its principles of mindful, seasonal eating and periodic cleansing can be a transformative step. It reminds us that true well-being stems not from chasing every new health trend, but often from returning to the timeless wisdom that emphasizes harmony, balance and a profound respect for the rhythms of nature. Navratri is a vibrant call to slow down, listen to our bodies and consciously align with the ancient dance of the seasons, offering a path to enduring health that transcends the fleeting trends of modernity.

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