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Fasting for husband's long life: A study of Hindu women living in Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City, Kailali District

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ABSTRACT

Fasting has been undertaken for spiritual or religious reasons throughout history. No matter what, whether it is "Teej," "Sarwan-Brata" "Karva-Chauth" or any other special occasion, a Hindu woman fasts for her husband to live long. Fasts "Vrata" or "upavasa" is a centuries-old tradition observed annually in Nepal, and girl children follow their mother's and grandmother's footsteps without questioning the matters of fact. For fasts, usually, Hindu women wake up before dawn to begin a fast at sunrise, take a bath, put on clean clothes, not eat or drink until evening. For a long time, I was constantly preoccupied with the question of fasting and did not get a rational answer, so I have decided to explore why Hindu women pray for love and long lives for their husbands in Nepal? Does fasting extend the life of the husband? To know the proper answer, I had been through religious scriptures, reviewed scientific research articles, interviewed a few priests and women who have fasting experience. Based on research findings, fasting for the husband may or may not bring longevity to the husband's life, but scientific research articles reported that fasting is good for detox and builds health and immunity for those who are fasting. In addition, not eating is the key to losing weight. Based on statistics from 2009 to 2019, the life expectancy at birth for women in Nepal was about 72.21 years, and the life expectancy at birth for men was about 69.26 years on average.

Keywords: *Fasting, Hindu, Culture, Religion, Long-life, Health*

1. BACKGROUND

Fasting (*Vrat or Brata*) means stopping eating altogether, or almost wholly, for a certain period. Fasts usually last from 12 to 24 hrs., but some continue for days at a time. An individual who fasts abstains from eating for a variable amount of time. It has been associated with potential benefits on human health (Samudera et al., 2019). In the primitive stage, religious actions, such as fasting, are identification or participation in the sacred. In the historical stage, religious actions are means of salvation; people atone for failures or sins and express their submission to a religious order through such acts. In the modern period, the key characteristic is multiplicity; formerly religious acts are now interpreted from various perspectives (Bellah, 1964, pp. 363–371). In the primitive context, fasting was associated with purification and preparation for receiving sacred power- "throughout the world of primitive man, the basic motives for fasting- purity, strength, and mysticism- remain remarkably universal" (Tamney, 1986). (Bellah, 1964) characterized the modern period as multiplex, but an alternative view emphasizes secularization. Secularization is a multifaceted concept. One meaning of this concept is the loss of a "bewitched" quality of the world. "The world is increasingly a 'matter-of-fact,' prosaic one. We go about the business of relating ourselves to nature, to work, to other men in a way that presumes that there is no special esoteric-supernatural forces operative within the world and in a way that makes very considerable use of human rationality..." (Schneider, 1970, p. 176). In the modern context, daily life is supposedly interpreted without reference to a religious framework. Whether the modern context is better characterized by a multiplicity of meaning systems or by the secularization thesis. In the modern context, secular reasons for fasting have become fashionable. The secular key is not humility, but weight control, as in Allan Cott's (1975) book *Fasting: The Ultimate Diet*. More generally, fasting is encouraged because it is healthy. Contemporary fasters have been called "disciplines of health" (Hirsch, 1975:85).

For spiritual reasons, fasting has long been recommended by religion, but its health benefits were only discovered in the early 1900s when doctors started recommending it for diabetes, obesity, and epilepsy. Clive McCay, a nutritionist at Cornell University, observed in the 1930s that rats exposed to strict daily dieting from a young age lived longer and were less likely to acquire cancer and other ailments as they aged than animals who ate at whim. McCa's previous studies had found that daily dieting had extended rats' lives as much as alternate-day feeding did. Furthermore, the Chicago researchers found that intermittent fasting "seems to postpone the development of illnesses that contribute to death" (Stipp, 2013). A different tale contains essential cultural information, particularly on people's differing obligations. A brother must protect his sister. A wife's primary duty is to her husband, and her efforts should be devoted to his welfare. As in many such tales, the consequences of failing to keep a religious observance are swift and severe, and the rewards from faithfully performing it are equally grand. There are various fasts and ceremonies for the welfare of husbands, but in Hindu religious festivals,

there is not even a single fast for the wife's welfare. Fasting for a long life for a husband at festivals such as "Teej," "Sarwan-Brata," and "Karva-Chauth" is fairly common. Then, depending on personal preference and one's chosen God or goddess, certain days of the week are designated for fasting. Accept fasting for your husband; there are several common fasting days for men and women.

People fast on Saturdays to placate the day's God, Shani, or Saturn. On Tuesdays, Hanuman's auspicious day, some people fast. On Mondays, some people fast to appease Lord Shiva. Then there's Purnima (full moon), *Ekadasi* (fortnight's 11th day), Krishna Janmashtami, Shivaratri, Navaratri, and so on.

In this research article, I explored why Hindu women pray for love, long lives for their husbands? Does fasting extend the life of their husband? To find out, I chose 50 women at random from Ward no.-4 of the Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City in Nepal's Kailali District who had visited Shivapuri-Dham Mandir during the *Teej* festival. With them, I did an open-ended interview. My main focus was on the *Teej* festival's fasting rituals during the research. In addition, I had reviewed secondary information on why women live longer than men?

Before presenting the research finding, I would like to briefly introduce some festivals related to fasting for a husband's long life or good health in Hindu culture.

A. Teej

Teej is a festival, and ritual event for women celebrated on the third day after the new moon in the Nepali month of *Bhadra* (mid-August to mid-September). It is often referred to in the published literature and by Nepali themselves as "the women's festival" because, on this day, all ritual activities are carried out by women and girls. The women adorn themselves in their finest jewelry and clothing and gather to sing and dance in front of a temple or an open area. They also maintain a strict fast for the entire day, beginning a series of simple rites culminating in puja (worship) and ritual bathing on *Risi Panchami* 2 days later. The fasting on *Teej* is described as a reenactment of the fast undergone by Parvati to gain Shiva as her husband (an event known to village women primarily through the Nepali version of this Saivite story, the *Swasthani-Vrata-Katha*). The dancing not accounted for in the texts or myths is viewed by Bennett as a "virtual seduction of Shiva" (1983, pp. 223–224), and the songs, it is implied (though no examples are cited), are flirtatious and erotic like the dancing they accompany. The ritual bathing on *Risi Panchami* is said to symbolize the efforts of the wives of the *Risi* to atone for their sins. The bath is said to cleanse women of their sin by inadvertently polluting men during menstruation. Because of this focus on the public rituals, the literature leaves us with the impression that *Teej* and *Risi Panchami* reaffirm patrilineal principles and that the women happily perform the rituals to benefit their present, past, or future husbands and redemption from sin n of menstruation. *Teej* is thus presented as a ritual that reins the gender relations of Hindu religious ideology and helps women who willingly and compliantly accept the patriarchal constraints system.

Teej's women and older girls spend most of the morning bathing and grooming themselves to look their best. They dress up in their best saris, preferably red or pink (colors linked with fertility and auspiciousness), and accessorize with jewelry and make-up. The red vermilion powder (*Sidur*) in a part of their hair, a red hair braid, red glass bangles, and a necklace style (*Tilhari*) worn only by married women are all worn by married ladies. The *Teej* is a term that refers to both the festival and the songs that were sung on that particular day (see Bista, 1969, p. 16).

Contemporary *Teej*, whether about women's *Dukha* (hardship, sadness, trouble, suffering recent events (*Ghatana*), or politics (*Rajniti*), share a meter, rhyming structure, and melody that vary only slightly from region to religion (Skinner et al., 1994). Having the opportunity to visit the maternal home and feast is especially significant for married women. Following a long feast known as *Dar*, the women sit for 24-hr extended fasting, where most do not eat or drink water. Watching women of all ages dance in the heat, rain, and without food or water for hours at a time is fascinating. Women celebrate such a festival to request special blessings from Lord Shiva, to find a good husband, and to pray for his longevity and prosperity (O'Neill, 2020). According to Hindu legend, the king (Parvati Father) intends to marry Lord Vishnu in an arranged marriage, but she manages to flee with the help of a friend and marries Lord Shiva. As a result, Lord Shiva and Parvati are said to have married on this day. This is why we commemorate Lord Shiva and Parvati shaking hands-on *Teej*. As a result, Hindu on this day, married women fast for their husband's long life's prosperity, and unmarried ladies fast to find a spouse like Shiva, who loves his wife more than himself (*Teej Festival in Nepal, 2020*). *Teej* is celebrated all over Nepal and in India, but some indigenous people do not celebrate *Teej* in Nepal like Newar and Tharu community people.

B. Sarwan-Brata

The prayers were offered to Lord Shiva as part of the annual *Sarwan-Brata* festival, or month of fasting, which usually falls between July and August. *Sarwan-Brata* is dedicated to Shiva, popular among Hindu women as they believe he possesses the qualities of a good husband. Women sang and danced to traditional music as part of rituals to appease Lord Shiva, the universe's destroyer and creator, and begged for long lives for their spouses or to seek his favor for future marriage (Shrestha, 2018).

C. Karva -Chauth

Religious vow (*Vrata*) observed on the fourth (*Chauth*) day of the dark, waning half of the lunar month of Kartik (October–November). *Married women take Karva-Chauth* to ensure their husbands' health, prosperity, and long life. There are many such vows in which women's observances and sacrifices are channeled into maintaining the welfare and prosperity of the family. Although such vows are voluntary in the strictest sense, there is significant social pressure for women to perform them, thus fulfilling their expected role as "good" wives. *Karva-Chauth* is a very strict vow; women observing it neither eat nor drink until they see the moon rising that evening. When the moon appears, the women offer water to it and then are permitted to drink. On this evening, women may also worship the deities Shiva and Parvati (the divine example of a happily married couple) and Kartikeya, their son. Women also give each other small pots (*Karva*) filled with sweets, hence the festival's name. The charter myth for this observance tells how a young bride grows faint and nearly lifeless while performing this fast at the home of her birth. Her brothers are so worried about her health that one of them climbs into a tree with a lantern, while the others convince her that the light is coming from the rising moon. The young woman is immensely relieved, but her husband falls dead as soon as she drinks water. Her brothers eventually have to confess what they have done. As the woman lays lamenting her newly gained widowhood, she is discovered by the goddess Parvati, who assures her that her husband will be

restored to life if she faithfully observes *Karva-Chauth* the following year. The young woman does as she is told and regains her husband (Chowdhry, 1990). *Karva-Chauth* is usually celebrated by those women who had Indian cultural influence in Nepal.

2. EXPLORING THE FACT OF FASTING

Married women respondents were randomly selected without bothering their caste, ethnicity, educational background, professional affiliation, or employment status. Among the respondents, 29 % of the sample reported never fasting but celebrating the festivals, 60 % fasted, and 11 % did so occasionally. Those who fasted occasionally reported that due to the unpredicted occurrence of menstruation, they were not able to continue the fasting on a dedicated day. According to them, fasting during menstruation is regarded as a sin or polluting family members. Menstruation is a unique experience that only women have. It has always been surrounded, however, by taboos and beliefs that keep women out of many aspects of society. Because they are menstruating, many girls and women face constraints in their daily lives. Among urban girls, not entering the "Puja" and "fasting" chamber is a significant limitation, whereas for rural girls, not entering the kitchen is the biggest restriction during menstruation. The cultural views about impurity connected with menstruation are at the root of this myth. The myth's origins may be traced back to Vedic times, and it is frequently tied to Indra's slaying of Vritras. As women had taken on a bit of Indra's guilt, murder manifests every month as menstrual flow (Chawla, 1992). Menstruation is a natural aspect of the reproductive cycle when blood from the uterus passes through the vaginal canal. Still, women believe in menstrual culture. During menstruation, women were kept in temporary exile, which is popularly known as "*Chaupadi*" in the research area. The *Chaupadi* is a tradition where menstruating women and those in their postpartum period are forced to secrete because they are deemed impure. Women were observing the ritual, usually live-in small huts and sheds. Every year, it was reported that women were found dead during menstrual exile due to unhygienic living, snake bites, smoke suffocation in small huts and sheds, abuse, and raped. The *Chapada* practice was declared a criminal offense. The government had introduced a law that stipulated a 3-month jail sentence and Rs three thousand fines against those convicted of *Chaupadi* crime. However, the tradition is still practiced in the enforcement of the law and campaigns. Many campaigners had destroyed the huts and shed made for *Chaupadi* practice but were not able to destroy them from the practitioner's mind.

Among the respondents, 94 % reported observing *Teej* and *Sawan-Brata* and 6 % *Karva Chauth*. It showed that *Karva Chauth* fast is not very much popular among the resident of Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City though it is a border with India. About respondents, 70 % were unaware of the cultural importance of *Teej*, *Srawan Brat*, or *Karwa-Chauth* festival. Those who were unaware of the cultural importance reported that since their childhood, they had seen their elder sister, aunty, mother, and relative observing the festival, and accordingly, they are following.

Out of 50 respondents, I encountered with a young widow woman, the widow woman reported not fasting during *Teej*. Previously, she used to fast, after her husband's death she stopped fasting. The young widow woman further said God did not bless her with the long life of her husband despite of her rigorous fasting. Her husband died during Maoist insurgency. Her husband was working in Nepal police. In response to why Hindu women pray for love, long lives for their husbands? About 91 % of the respondents reported that the husband is everything for them; the husband is their life and security. They further reported, to be a widow is very difficult; still, seeing a widow is regarded as bad luck or misfortune in our society, not only that widow or old widow women are regarded as a practitioner of witchcraft in our society. Suppose widow women are young and good-looking than she viewed as a sexual object and abused. To them, life without a husband is like a hell, so they were found praying for their husband's long life.

About 9 % of women reported no idea reason behind the fasting. They were found just following the ritual because they have had seen their mother and other women in the family and neighbors following the fasting rituals with glamor. As per my observation, the "*Teej*" festival is getting more expensive; instead of clean cloths, fasting women were found putting new expensive ornaments (*Tilhari*), red-saris, shawl, even they were found parting around the month and drinking beer, whisky, vodka, and wine. Not only clothing, but modern women were also doing quality facial and body spa treatment to ensure to looks best in the parties. The booming economy and wave of consumerism have given the Nepalese middle-class more spending power, and malls and luxury stores are wooing women with such items and practice, but those who cannot afford have a soft feeling.

Does fasting extend the life of the husband? About 65 % of women believed that their fasting would extend their husbands' lives; if not, why have other women observed the festival for ages. A respondent narrated the mythical story to prove her belief and power of penance, "Once upon a time, Bhadra Desh was ruled by a monarch named Ashwapati (country). He didn't have any children, so he kept a rigorous penance. Savitri, Lord Brahma's wife, was pleased with him and bestowed upon him a daughter, whom he named Savitri after the goddess." When the girl reached adulthood, she was married to a prince named Satyawar. When Naarad, the heavenly guru, learned of this, he warned Satyawati against marrying Satyawar. Satyawar was supposed to die exactly 1 year later; he told Savitri. Satyawati, by contrast, adored Satyawar and was eager to marry him. Satyawar went to the forest to get firewood 1 year later on a terrible day. He was accompanied by Savitri. Satyawar became ill and was on the verge of passing away. Satyawar's soul was being taken away by Lord Yama's messengers. They could not approach Savitri because of her devotion to her husband and her faith in God. Lord Yama was informed of the situation, and he arrived in the forest to take Satyawar's soul. Again, a determined Savitri told Yama to take her life and return to the life of Satyawar. Finally, Yama surrendered."

I have no idea how far does it works, but I doubt that women must have been fasting for ages for their husbands because of the fear of *Sati-Pratha*, a widow who immolates herself at her husband's pyre. *Sati* system was a model for the high-caste Hindus and was widely practiced in Hindu primitive society. Women of high status were required to follow patriarchal rules, but women of lower caste (*Jatis*) were often regulated by their *Jati*'s customs, which allowed them avoid patriarchal demands in some situations. The major caste groupings and regional practices would have differed in terms of kinship relationships and gender relations. Some traditional practices from the prior status were likely kept during the early stages of conversion to *Jati* rank. Gradually, however, these were either absorbed into the specific *Jati*'s rituals, or the *Jati*'s proximity to caste society would have necessitated greater adherence to existing caste rules. Encouragement of keshatriya women to become *Sati* after their husbands perished in combat or on a raid, for example, would have decreased support for *Niyoga*, *levirate*, and widow remarriage (Thapar, 2002). To protect the daughter, Newari Community of Nepal had different ritual of marriage which is known as *Bel Biwaha*, three times, girls from Nepal's Newar minority have been married. For guys, however, not all three times. They were created to marry a *Bel* fruit (also known as a wood apple) for the first time. Some Newaris

believe Bel is a symbol of Lord Vishnu, while others believe the fruit represents Suvama Kumar, Lord Shiva's son. They are then wedded to the Sun for a while before finally marrying a guy. In Nepal, the rite known as 'Ehee, ihi, or Bel Bibah' is conducted when a girl is in her preadolescence, or before puberty. It is conducted to protect the girl from numerous perils, such as ghost attacks. But the most crucial purpose is to keep her from becoming a widow. Because the girl is married to a deity for all eternity, the death of her mortal human spouse cannot strip her of her marital status and render her a widow. It also safeguarded them from being burned alive (Sati system) on their husband's funeral pyre, which was once a frequent practice among Hindu groups. It also encourages widow remarriage in Newar society, freeing women from the Hindu practice of one life and one marriage (Magar, 2019). The Brahmanical code altogether prohibited the widow from remarrying. This extremely repressive system of high-caste Hindus for widows condemned them to a life of living hell, especially among the child widows. The social reformers made virulent attacks on this Brahmanical code, then Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher. Due to Raja Ram Mohan Roy's efforts, Nepal banned "Sati-Pratha" 91 years after India proclaimed it an infraction in 1829.

About 35% of women were unsure, yet they continued to do the ceremony based on their conviction. According to the data from a professionally released research article, Nepalese born in 2017 have a life expectancy of 71 years. However, the first 61 years of their lives will be spent in good health. Females have a 73-year life expectancy with 62 years of the good life, while males have a 69-year life expectancy with 60 years of healthy life (Nepal Burden of Disease, 2017).

In most countries, women have a greater life expectancy at birth than men. This was previously considered due to biological reasons. Or are males more hesitant to seek medical advice, and do they live a less healthy lifestyle, for example, when it comes to smoking and drinking? Do they have a higher risk of being involved in an accident? Women, by contrast, are at risk during childbirth.

If there are any remaining guys who believe women are the weaker sex, it is past time for them to reconsider. Women are tougher than men from birth to very old age when it comes to the most basic test of toughness: the ability to stay alive. The average guy can run a 100-meter dash quicker and lift heavier weights than the average woman. Women, by contrast, now outlast men by roughly five to six years. There are around six women for every four men by the age of 85. The ratio is more than two to one at the age of 100. By the age of 122, the current world record for human life span, women have a one-to-one advantage (Kirkwood, 2010).

The researchers analyzed the life spans of 101 different species, ranging from sheep to elephants, and discovered that females lived 18% longer than males in almost 60% of the species studied. Females live approximately 7.8% longer than males in humans. The study, headed by experts at University Lyon 1 and published in the journal "Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences", discovered that this was not due to the sexes aging at different rates, but that females had a lower risk of adult death than males. The scientists speculate that females may have lived longer than males due to complicated interactions between local environmental circumstances and sex-specific genes (University of Bath, 2020).

According to Ansberry, that women outlast males. Men's life expectancy was 76.1 years in 2017, while women's life expectancy was 81.1 years. According to studies, the longevity disparity would widen in the future. Women's life expectancy is expected to reach 87.3 years by 2060, compared to 83.9 years for men, according to the US Census Bureau. Women, for example, are more likely to see a doctor when they are sick, according to some studies. And Katharine Esty, an 85-year-old psychologist who interviewed 128 people in their eighties for her book "Eighty some things," discovered that while "guys will still eat steak and order French fries," elderly women put in more effort to keep healthy (Ansberry, 2020).

The hormone testosterone has been linked to a decline in men's immune systems and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease as they get older. It's also linked to dangerous behaviors like smoking, drinking, and eating unhealthy foods. Men are less likely than women to follow a doctor's recommendations after being diagnosed. Men are more likely than women to take life-threatening risks and die in vehicle accidents or gunfights, according to statistics (Hoke, 2020).

A person's gender may have an impact on how they respond to a diagnosis of Covid-19, a disease caused by a new coronavirus. For example, men lose antibody-producing B cells in their blood after the age of 65, but women do not. Women's blood vessels mature faster than men's, according to a study published this year (Ansberry, 2020).

While analyzing the data, I can say that fasting for a husband's long life may not extend the husband's life, but it can extend the life of fasting women because fasting is good for health. The study show, fasting helps to drop insulin levels, and human growth hormone increases. Intermittent fasting allows people to eat less calories while somewhat increasing their metabolism. It's an effective way to lose weight and visceral fat. Studies have revealed that intermittent fasting reduces oxidative stress and inflammation in the body. This should help to slow down the aging process as well as the onset of a variety of ailments. Studies have shown that intermittent fasting lowers blood pressure, cholesterol, triglycerides, and inflammatory markers, all of which are risk factors for heart disease. Fasting triggers, the autophagy metabolic pathway, which rids cells of trash. In animal studies and certain human trials, intermittent fasting has been found to help prevent cancer. In human tests, it has been proven to help reduce the side effects of chemotherapy. Fasting for short periods has been demonstrated to promote brain health. It has the potential to promote the creation of new neurons while also protecting the brain from injury. Intermittent fasting may protect against neurodegenerative disorders like Alzheimer's disease, according to animal studies. Intermittent fasting, according to animal research, may help you live longer (De Cabo & Mattson, 2019).

3. CONCLUSION

Fasting plays a significant role in the lives of Hindu women. The dominant motive behind the practice of fasting was to ensure the long lives of their husbands and to please God and Goddess to gain spiritual power and blessing. As a researcher, it is challenging to measure the quantity and quality of spiritual power and blessing gained by fasting women. The fasting practitioners can only experience the bliss and volume of power they gained. There is no doubt that fasting for a husband's long life is acknowledged by the husband, family members, and society, and it may ensure respect to those who fast for their husbands. Teej festival also gives women a chance to move out of their confined private worlds into the public world, dominated by men and out of their reach in daily life. The modern women were found adding additional charm and glamor to the festival or doing a lot more than their mother ever did for the festival. The concept of pollution and purity during the menstrual time and the requirement of purification is nonsense; such taboos about menstruation present

in many societies impact girls' and women's emotional state, mentality, lifestyle, and most importantly, health. Fasting for a husband's long life also does not make any sense; no man was found fasting for his wife's long life since the aged. In modern days few men are copying women out of their love. Fasting in the husband's name is a patriarchal custom. Fasting for good health and weight loss is very scientific. Healthy celebration of *Teej* is always good; *Teej* day should be marked as women's solidarity day, the solidarity of all women without discrimination among rich and poor women, without discriminating high-caste and low-caste women, without discriminating disabled women and people from other religions and regions. No matter what, the scientific secondary research data shows that fasting is helping to reduce weight, controlling or reducing blood pressure without causing hypotension complications. Fasting can be used to repair one's health condition by repairing the risk factors such as blood pressure and being overweight. According to the research, females have a 73-year life expectancy with 62 years of healthy living, while males have a 69-year life expectancy with 60 years of healthy living. If fasting really sustain the husband's life then husband should have a longer life expectancy than wife. Fasting is for own's benefit, not for the benefit of husband or others.

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