



Pranayama in Religious Scriptures – A Review

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Abstract:

At this time, the main purpose of *Pranayama* was considered to be to improve the physical and mental condition by adjusting the speed of breathing and in the medieval period, its purpose was considered to be to achieve a higher spiritual state. But even before that, in ancient times it was mainly practiced as a part of religious activities. Its first mention is found in the *Sutra granth*. Thus, during the period of *Sutra granth*, *Smritis* and *Puranas*, *Pranayama* gradually developed from a religious point of view, and in modern times it is used for both spiritual and physical benefits. These different development sequences of *Pranayam* given in the religious scriptures are being described in this paper.

KEYWORDS: Pranayama, Yoga, Religious Scriptures, Pranayama and Religious Scriptures.

Introduction:

The word *Yoga* means union. Union may be of many forms like - *Atma* and *Parmatma*, *Indriy* etc. *Maharishi Patanjali* has described the eight parts of *yoga* –

यमनीयमासनप्राणायामप्रत्याहारधारणाध्यानसमधयो अष्टावडामि ||¹ PYS-2/29

Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, Samadhi.

Out of which *Pranayama* is the fourth one. *Pranayama* is made up of two words *Pran* and *Aayam*. **Prana** means life energy or the life force that is seen operating everything in the physical world and that which roams in the mental world, its name is *Prana*². **Aayam** means expansion or regulation.³ **Pranayam** means that which keeps the life force regular, controlled and restrained. The life force that continuously emanates from the nerves of a human being is versatile, decentralized from the center - the process of bringing it under control is called *Pranayama*. This same life force operates the physical body and also experiences visible form.⁴ *Pranayama* has a very important place in the public life of India. In ancient times, any celibate or householder used to do *Pranayam* during daily worship in the morning, afternoon and evening. Therefore, it can be said that all the works of Hindus are started only after *Pranayam*. While eating, drinking or doing any work, Indian people practice *Pranayam* by doing *achaman* three times and then making a resolution again. Doing *Pranayam* before all tasks means that by doing *Pranayam*, the mind will become concentrated and thoughtful and will be active in work, as a result of which there will be success in the assigned work.

Pranayama described in various religious scriptures:

Pranayama described in *Sutra Grantha* - The first mention of *Pranayama* is found in the Sutra texts. These texts are divided into three divisions – *Shrauta Sutra*, *Dharma Sutra* and *Griha Sutra*. Out of these, *Shrauta Sutras* are related to Vedic rituals, *Dharma Sutras* are related to religious rituals and *Grihya Sutras* are related to household religious duties and their place in religious literature is considered quite ancient. Of these, *Pranayama* is mentioned in *Ashvalayana Shrauta Sutra*, *Satyashadha Shrauta Sutra*, *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, *Baudhayana Grihya Sutra*. But *Pranayama* does not have any independent status in them; rather the *Abhyantar Kumbhaka* which was done by holding the air inside while chanting a mantra, can be considered a form of *Pranayama*. Describing this action, it is written in the *Apastamba Sutra*,

“आ तमितोः प्राणमायच्छेदित्येके”, that is, while chanting the *mantra*, the breath should be stopped inside. Thus, two types of methods are mentioned regarding stopping breathing. One author says, “Breathing should be stopped until the organs become exhausted.” But others have written, ‘यथाशक्ति अप्राणनम्’ i.e. the breath should be stopped as per one's capacity. *Baudhayana Sutra* clearly describes stopping the breath while mentally chanting *Gayatri*, *Vyahriti*, *Pranava* and *Shiras*. Thus, we can say that *Abhyantar Kumbhaka* was the basic form of *Pranayama* in religious activities.⁵

After the *Sutra* texts, *Pranayama* has been described more clearly in the *Smritis* and its importance has also been specifically explained. In this regard, these verses 69,70,71,72 of Chapter 6 of *Manusmriti* are famous-

“अहा रात्रा च याज्ञन्तूहिनस्त्यज्ञानतो यतिः | तेषां स्नात्वा विशुद्धयर्थं प्राणायामान्वडाचरेत् //

प्राणायामा ब्राह्मणस्य त्रयोऽपि विधिवक्ताः | व्याहृति प्रणवैर्युक्ता विज्ञेयं परमं तपः //

दहन्ते ध्यायमाननां धातुनां हि यथा मलाः | तथेन्द्रियाणां दहन्ते दोषाः प्राणस्य निग्रहात् //

प्राणायामैदहेद्वेषाद्धरणाभिश्च किल्विषम् | प्रत्याहारेण संसर्गन्ध्यानेनानीश्वरानुग्रान् //⁶

If some living beings are unknowingly destroyed by a saint, then he should bathe and do six *pranayama* as atonement for his sins. Performing the three *Pranayams* (*Purak*, *Rechak* and *Kumbhak*) daily with *Vyahriti* and *Pranava*, is like a great penance for a *Brahmin*. Just as the impurities of all types of metals are burnt by heating a metal in a melting pot, in the same way all the defects (sins) of the senses are burnt by *Pranayama*. Burn all the defects (sins) by *Pranayama*, destroy other sins by *Dharana*, get rid of desires by small food and get rid of the opposite feelings of God by meditation. Explaining the importance of *Pranayam* *Manu Maharaj* has told that it is possible to counteract many types of sins only through *Pranayama*. In the 11th chapter, where atonement for various types of sins has been described, *Manu Maharaj* has said that atonement for various types of sins is possible only through *Pranayam*.

Description of *Pranayam* in the *Puranas*:

The glory of *Pranayam* has been described at many places in the *Puranas*. There is a provision in the *Puranas* to meditate on *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Mahesh* along with *Pranayam*. Although the words 'Poorak, *Kumbhaak*, *Rechak'* have not been used in the *Puranas*, they have clearly described how to perform these activities along with their quantities. It is written, "While inhaling, one should meditate on *Vishnu* in the navel region, while holding the breath in, one should meditate on the figure of *Brahma* in the heart region and while exhaling, one should meditate on *Shiva* in the forehead region." The calculation for how long the breath should be held and how long it should be exhaled has also been explained in the *Puranas*.⁷

Description of Pranayama in Patanjali's 'Yoga Sutra':

The first text to describe *Pranayama* independently from the spiritual and mental point of view is *Patanjali's 'Yoga Sutra'*. There is no mention of any other *mantra*-chanting, meditation etc. along with *Pranayama*, rather while describing the eight limbs of *Yoga*, it has been described as a means of liberation. While explaining *Pranayama*, it is said in the beginning itself –

"तस्मिन्स्ति श्वासप्रश्वायोग्गतिविच्छेदः प्राणायामः" ||2/49⁸

There are three types of *pranayama* – external, internal and stopped. When it is given space, time and number, it becomes long and subtle. While describing the benefits of *Pranayam*, *Patanjali* has said –

"ततः क्षीयते प्रकाशावरणम्" ||2/52⁹

"धारणासु च योग्यता मनसः" ||2/53¹⁰

That is, by the practice of *Pranayama*, the veils of *Rajoguna* and *Tamoguna* are removed. And the light of the soul becomes visible. Due to which the quality of goodness emerges and the human mind acquires the power to concentrate and settle at one center. Thus, according to *Patanjali*, *Pranayama* is not related to any kind of worship or chanting, but is a means of attaining supreme enlightenment.

In this way, due to the spread of *Patanjali's* yoga system, *Pranayama* got divided into two categories. The ancient way of practitioners used to preach to do *Pranayama* with any mantra or name or *Omkar* and the people of the new method did not consider any need of any kind of mantra etc. in its practice. Later, both these systems came to be propagated under two different names, one *Agarbha* and the other *Sagarbha*. When *Pranayam* is done with meditation and mantra then it is called *Sagarbha* and when only *Vayu* is restrained then it is called *Agarbha*. This has also been said in 'Kurma Purana' –

"अगम्भश्च सगम्भश्च द्वितीयस्तु तयोर्वरः । जपध्यानं बिनाऽगम्भः सगम्भस्तत्पमन्वितः" ||¹¹

That is, there are two types of *Pranayama* – one *Agarbha* and the other *Sagarbha*. Of these two, *Sagarbha* is the best. When it is done without any kind of chanting or meditation then it is called *Agarbha*. When chanting is done with meditation, then it is called *Sagarbha*.

Pranayama in Bhagavad Gita- In the fourth chapter of *Shrimadbhagwadgita*, *Pranayama* is considered as a way of self-realization while describing various types of *Yagyas* for God-realization-

"अपाने जुहवती प्राणं प्राणेऽपानं तथा परे प्राणापानगती रुदध्वा प्राणायामः परायणः" ||¹²

It has been said in the *Gita*- That is, the sacrificial fire of *pranavayu* in *apana vayu*, the sacrificial fire of *apanavayu* in *pranavayu* or stopping the movement of *prana* and *apana* is *Pranayama*.

In *Pranayama*, other yogis who block the movement of *prana* and *apana*, offer *prana* in *apana* and *apana* in *prana*. Yogis who do this type of *sadhna* also attain God like Behavior those who do *sadhna* by other methods, as it has been explained further-

"अपरे नियताहाराः प्राणान्प्राणेषु जुह्वति । सर्वेऽप्येते यज्ञविदो यज्ञक्षपितकल्पाः" ||

यज्ञशिष्टामृतभुजो यान्ति ब्रह्म सनातनम् । नायं लोकोऽस्त्ययज्ञस्य कुतोऽन्यः कुरुसत्तम" ||¹³

Other *yogis*, who have regular diet, sacrifice their *Prana* in their *Prana*. All those whose sins are destroyed by such sacrifices are the knower's of sacrifices. All the *yogis* who consume the nectar of knowledge obtained by such a *yajna* attain the eternal *Brahm* (Supreme Soul) happiness. Men without *Yagya* can neither get happiness in this world nor can be a part of welfare in the hereafter.

Thus the *Gitakara* has clearly declared *Pranayama* as a means of attaining liberation. Along with this, he has also mentioned the four parts of *Pranayama* like *Purak*, *Rechak*, *Antah Kumbhak* etc. The breath that is drawn from outside to the inside is called '*Prana*' and that which is drawn from inside to outside is called '*Apana*'. According to this theory, '*Prana* should be sacrificed in *Apana*', that is, instead of exhaling the breath in the normal order, it should be held inside and performed *Abhyantar Kumbhak*. After that *Apana* should be sacrificed/ converted in *Prana*. It means the exhaled breath should be stopped there and the chest should be left empty for a while. By doing this, there is external Kumbhak and when the breath is taken inside, it fills well in the lungs and starts doing the work of purification of the body and development of the mind with more power.

Conclusion:

Thus, during the period of *Sutra Granth*, *Smritis*, and *Puranas*, *Pranayama* gradually developed from a religious point of view. At that time, no one propounded the independent existence of *Pranayama* and its benefits, rather everyone considered it a part of religious activities from their point of view. Even the evening ritual was incomplete without *Pranayama* and *Abhyantar Kumbhaka* was considered mandatory even during *Havan*, *Yagya*, etc. The various types of methods of *Pranayama* that we see today have been developed over thousands of years. If we consider its original form, there is no material difference between the initial and current methods.

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