

Saṃskāra – Sacraments

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As per Hinduism, the Saṃskāra is a series of sacraments, sacrifices and rituals that serve as rites of passage and mark the various stages of the human life and to signify entry to a particular Āśrama (i.e. stage of life). The Saṃskāra is said to be helping for achieving spiritual nourishment, peace of mind and ultimately moksha (mokṣa). Saṃskāra gives a spiritual touch to the important events at different stages of a Hindu life – right from pre-birth to post-death.

Saṃskāras are the turning points of life and need to be celebrated. Celebrations are very important ingredients of Saṃskāras. They directly or indirectly involve our respected elders, scholars, & dear ones. Everyone gets together to convey their best wishes & blessings to the concerned person and thus there is social & religious sanction for the act & ceremony. Saṃskāras are great, time-tested tools in our traditional systems which help carve out a great personality. Apart from scriptural validation, history also proves to us the great effectiveness of these methods.

In this section we shall present an introduction to these famous sixteen Saṃskāras of Hindus, which cover the entire life span of a person and take him to the door steps to Truth as they believe.

1. Garbhādhāna (Conception)

All sources recognize this as the first Saṃskāra. This is the enthusiastic prayer for a child. This is done for fulfillment of parental duty to continue the race. To produce a good child, its mother and father should have pure thoughts and observe the rules of Śāstras. God characterizing parents are necessary for bringing up a good child in the world.

2. Puṅsavana (Fetus Protection)

This second Saṃskāra ceremony is performed during the third or the fourth month of pregnancy, when the first signs of

conception are seen, and is to be performed when someone desires a male child. The reason for expecting male child is believed to be in the belief that it is the male child who carries the Vamśa forward. Like the first Saṃskāra i.e. Garbhādhāna, Puṅsavana Saṃskāra is also restricted to the family members.

3. Sīmantonayana (Satisfying the longing of the pregnant mother)

This Saṃskāra is performed during the seventh month of pregnancy and prayers are offered for the healthy physical and mental growth of the child. The other importance of this Saṃskāra is to free the expectant mother from worries since the last 3 months are very difficult for pregnant woman- both physically and mentally. A Pūjā is performed for purification of the atmosphere and as an offering to God for the peace of mother and infant, for giving birth to a peaceful and holy child. This rite is primarily social and festival in nature, intended to keep the pregnant woman in good spirits. A future mother should have good thoughts at all times. She should place Picture of ‘Balgopal’ or ‘Laddu Gopal’ in her home. She should read the Gīta and other scriptures in addition to performing her daily work and should avoid thrilling books and movies. During Solar and lunar eclipses, a woman should not use any kind of weapons. During normal times, she should avoid violent thoughts. Her husband should help keep her peaceful and cheerful.

4. Jātakarma (Birth Rituals)

Jātakarma performed on six days from the birth of a child, is for the purification of the house. This is done in order to keep a child in a clean atmosphere where he may not incur any physical or mental problems. It is also called Goddess Shashthi (Ṣaṣṭi) is the protector of children. Jātakarma is followed with Gṛha Pūja, Homa.

5. Nāmakaraṇa (Name giving)

This Saṃskāra is performed on the tenth, eleventh or twelfth day with recitation of Mantras. The baby child gets name on completion of this Saṃskāra, according to the 27 Nakshatra and the position of the moon at the time of child's birth. An appropriate name is given to the child according to the planetary position of birth time and the first letter of the name is taken from the Hora Shatra.

6. Niṣkramaṇa (Taking the child outdoors)

This ceremony is performed on or after 40 days, but some scriptures allow it at the time of naming ceremony when the child is taken out of the home for the first time. The reason for this Saṃskāra is to show obedience to the sun, moon, fire, wind etc. - the Pañcamahābhūta (Five elements). This is supposed to enhance the age and physical and mental development of the child.

7. Annapraśana (Giving the child solid food)

This Saṃskāra is performed on sixth month, when the child is given solid food (anna) for the first time. Mantras recited and oblations are offered to the various deities. Sweet porridge or rice pudding can be given to the child, if parents are desirous of nourishment, holy luster, swiftness, or splendor. One of them with curd, honey and ghee is given to the child while reciting Prasad Mantras.

8. Chūḍākarāṇa (Hair Cutting)

This Saṃskāra is the first time cutting of hair of the child. The ceremony is to be performed on an auspicious day after the age of one year. This ceremony is performed for the development of power, better understanding, and for long life. The hair must be disposed of at holy places where no one can find them. Brahmins chant Mantras for a healthy, long life of the child. This Saṃskāra is restricted to the family level.

9. Karnavedha (Ear Piercing)

This Saṃskāra is performed in the third or fifth year, piercing of the ears. With the commencement of Sūrya Pājā; the father should first address the right ear of the child with the mantra “Oh God may we hear bliss with our ears”, performed so that child may listen to good things and to have a good education.

10. Upanayana (Sacred Thread)

Upanayana is the ceremony of wearing the sacred thread called Yajñopavītam. When male child attains 5 years, the wearing of the sacred thread Yajñopavītam, is ceremoniously done. This Saṃskāra is second birth for child – A spiritual birth. The child is thereafter authorized to perform all rituals. Study of Vedas begins with the Guru.

11. Vedārambha (Study of Vedas)

This Saṃskāra is done along with Upanayana. Vedārambha is the learning of Vedas and Upanishads in ‘Gurukula’. In the beginning of each academic period there is a ceremony called Upakarma and at the end of each academic period there is another ceremony called Upasarjana. The child commences his journey on the road to spiritual life.

12. Samavartana (Completing Education)

Samavartana is the ceremony associated with the end of formal education of Vedas in ‘Gurukula’. After learning the rules of life he returns home from his Teacher’s Ashram. When he completes his education about and religion, the law of life, his first Ashram Brahmacharya is complete. He is now eligible to enter into the householder stage, and considered a qualified man to get married.

13. Vivāha (The Marriage)

This Saṃskāra is entry into the second Ashram. The life as individual family begins. Vedic Hindu marriage is viewed as sacramental, which is a lifelong commitment of one wife and

one husband. It is the strongest bond between a man and a woman, which takes place in the presence of their parents, relatives, and friends. The bride and groom walk around Agni hand in hand. The bride sacrifices grains in the fire and chants mantras.

14. Vānaprastha (Preparing for renouncing)

This ceremony is performed at the age of 50, in some cases at the age of 60. With the commencement of his ceremony, a man completes his Gṛhastha Dharma and enters into Vānaprastha Ashram (forest hermit). Man withdraws himself from all worldly activities, retires into the forest.

15. Sanyāsi

Before leaving the body a Hindu sheds all sense of responsibility & relationships to awake & revel in the timeless truth. A Sanyāsi renounces the world and leads a life of study and meditation by living on alms.

16. Antyeṣṭi (Last Rites)

Antyeṣṭi (last rites), sometimes referred to as Antima Saṃskāra, are the rituals associated with funeral. The body is laid on the ground with the head towards the north. The dead body is washed, perfumed and wrapped in a new white cloth and decked with flowers. For ten days following death, food is not prepared at home and relatives and friends take the responsibility of getting food for the family.