

SOME ASPECTS OF HINDU SACRAMENTS

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ABSTRACT: *The various ceremonies (Sacraments) performed by practitioners of Hindu faith are explained in this article.*

The Hindu realized early that life was a most intricate art that required constant care, cultivation and refinement. A man born and left to himself is a mass of elements crude and brutal and slightly removed from his fellow beings in forest. The ancient seers and sages, gifted with light and resources tried to transform the crude animal into the refined man with the help of sacraments.

The sacraments – or the more common word “ceremony” – does not give the full and precise meaning of the equivalent Sanskrit word “SAMSKARA”, for, samskra does not mean merely an outward rite or observance which is religious or held sacred, but also as a peculiar excellence accruing from the performance of the rites – an excellence residing either in the soul or in the body. Thus it may be seen that the Hindu sacraments aimed at not only the formal purification of the body but also at sanctifying, impressing, refining and perfecting the entire individuality of the recipient thus producing a special merit in him.

The purpose of the samskaras are many. The performance of the samskaras was a means of self expression – through which man could express his own joys, felicitations and sorrows (as in the case of the death ceremony) at a various events of life. Secondly it had a cultured purpose, for the

samskaras moulded the character affording the subject timely orientations and help. Thirdly it gives the human being ample scope to express his love for art. No celebrations went without a “KOLAM” – the designs made with rice floor and decorations with flowers in all its rich variety and splendour. Fourthly it also had a social impact because it not only brought the family together but also the friends, well wishers and the community around. Last but not least, the samskaras reminded man of the Divine being over all of us and through them gave him a chance to thank him for all his mercies.

The institutions of the samskaras took a very comprehensive view of life. The life of the person does not start with his birth; it goes further back as it is conditioned with a parentage, heredity and environment. So it starts from the conception.

The very first sacrament therefore is known as “**Garbhadhana**” which word literally means “placing the seed in the womb”. It is the sacred duty of the married couple to approach each other in the proper time for the sake of pregnancy, so that the race might continue. This is an important sacrament from the cultured point of view for it is not a primitive man expressing his wonder at the prospect of begetting a child, but a purposive man approaching his wife in an

attitude of religious serenity – which believes will consecrate the expected child with the blessed intention of having progeny.

After the conception is ascertained, the child in the womb is consecrated by the second samskara called '**Pumsavana**'. This is performed in the third or fourth month of pregnancy when the moon is in the male constellation. Though according to our age-old Indian tradition, there is no distinction between man and woman, a male child is sought for as the first child, for he not only carries and later conveys the family name but he is also a source of investment at the time of old age of his parents. The conjunction of the moon with a male constellation is a symbolic of a male or vinile child. The mother is required to fast on the day and in the night the sprouts of the banyan tree are pounded and the juice is dropped in her right nostril. This is a symbolic treatment to nourish the child properly, and it results in the male procreation, through the stimulation of the foetus. This practice is supposed have a medical basis too.

The third treatment is called '**Simantanayana**' in which the hair of the pregnant woman is ceremoniously parted. This is to bring the prosperity to the mother and long life to the unborn child with caressing attention; the husband himself parts the hairs of the pregnant wife, and after that he ties the 'twig of jig tree round her neck wrist with the words' Rich in sap is this tree and so like this tree rich in sap, be thou fruitful'. The expectant mother is decked with flowers and glass bangles in order to keep her in good cheer and happy. The second phase is the life of the child starts when it is delivered by the mother and assumes an independent existence. The first is the **Jatkarma**. The moment the father

hears about the birth of this child, he plunges into a pool of water or in a river. The higher the water splashes the happier the need of the growing child, brought face to face with the sublime splendour of the universe.

"Annaprasana" is the first feeding of the child with solid food, it is primarily connected with the physical necessity of the child. On the day of the feeding ceremony, sacramental food is prepared out of cleansed material while muttering appropriate vedic hymns.

At the end of the first year – the first birthday of the child – the **"Cudakarana"** and Karmanedha ceremony is performed. The former is the ceremonial shaving and ancestors are supposed to be, of this occasional. The birth of a child is regarded as the fruition of conjugal life, and it is a highly auspicious occasion because of its racial importance.

Then comes the name giving ceremony, **"Namakarana"**. The boys are frequently named after a god who is regarded as their protector, or they are named after a saint whose blessing are sought for, the name of the girl should contain an uneven number of syllables. It should be easy to pronounce, not harsh to hear, clear is meaning, charming, auspicious and ending in a long vowel.

Then comes **"Niskramana"**, the occasion when the child is taken out of the house for the first time. The child who has been confined to the house is brought out to the world. A number of precautionary measures are taken for the safety of the child. The sacrament is significant, as it recognizes a vital cutting of the hair which is supposed to be done for the long life and beauty of the child. The most distinguished feature of this

sacrament is the arrangement of the hair tuft. Inside the head, near the top is the joint of the artery (Sira) and a critical juncture (Sandhi). There, in the eddy of hairs, is the vital spot called adhipathi or overlord. So this vital connection is thus explained. The later is the boring of the ear. Though the custom might have been ornamental in origin, later on it was believed as also to be useful from the health point of view.

Then comes the educational samskaras – **Vidhyarambha and Upanayana.**

The first must have originated at an advanced stage of culture, when alphabet was evolved and used for literary purposes. It was perhaps historical in origin, as it is mentioned only in later literature. This is performed in the fifth year of the child when the mind of the child has developed and become ready to receive education. When the sun is in the northern hemisphere an auspicious day is fixed and the parent priest or guru helps the child to write the first alphabet with a gold or silver coin on the patch of grain which is spread out like a page. Thus by the proper mastery of the alphabet he enters the wide domain of literature.

Upanayana or the sacrament or initiation stands for taking the child to a teacher for education. The most striking feature of the Upanayana lies in the belief that by its performance the initiate is given a cultured and spiritual rebirth and is done between the 8th and 10th year of the boy. Investiture of the student with Yajnopavita (sacred thread) has become, in course of time, the most important item of this sacrament. The teacher performs this ceremony with an appropriate ‘mantra’ asking for the recipients long life, purity, strength and illumination while the latter remains looking towards the sun. The constant wearing of

the sacred thread reminds him that life is a continuous sacrifice necessitated by the socio-religious duties. This sacrament symbolizes the students entering the boundless realm of knowledge, it marks for him his destination and it reminds him of the complete harmony between him and his teacher.

Of all the Hindu sacraments, marriage is the most central one. In India majority of the weddings are arranged by the parents, various things are considered before finalizing the marriage. The family, age, traits of body, wealth and resourcefulness are some of the considerations. A great stress is laid in biological, intellectual and spiritual homogeneity between the bride and the bride-groom. The father of the bride formally hands over the bride to the bride-groom with a declaration of purpose calling to witness the sacred fire round which the pair takes a symbolic walk; for the fire is the centre and the symbol of union of the couple effected by the rite. The bride-groom accepts the bride as the wife formally, by clasping her hand which suggests that he had accepted the responsibility of her companionship. The husband then asks the wife to take seven steps in the northern direction with the words ‘step one for sap, two for juice, three for the prospering wealth, four for comforts, five for cattle, six for the seasons. Friend! Be with seven steps united to me So be thou devoted to me’. The alliance or the symbol of marriage is what is commonly called a **“Thirumangalyam”**. This could differ in pattern from state to state but it is generally in the form of a chain round the neck with family symbols in gold standing for the divine contract and unity. Thus the marriage is a permanent union and not a temporary contract.

Then comes **Shastibhthapoorthy** – a ceremony conducted on the 60th birthday of the man. The man who has spent many eventful years with his wife thanks God for this, His mercy. It is considered as the ladies “good karma” which has been the cause of the husband’s long life. Vedic rites as in the case of marriage are performed on that day.

The few who lives longer-until the age of 84, have got another sacrament. This is the **Sathabishekam** – when by now, he is supposed to have seen 1008 full moon. The number 108, 1008 have great significance in the Hindu rituals. A man who has lived through 1008 full moon days propitiates the Goals on that day and prays for health the rest of his life and more important than that a better understanding and realization in his next which is not far away.

The last sacrament in the life of a Hindu is the “**Antyestic**”. A Hindu consecrates his entire life through the performance of various sacraments at suitable stages, and at his death, the survivors consecrate the event by death rites fro his future good. Though

performed after a man’s death, this samskara is not the less important, because for a Hindu the value of the next world is higher than that of the present. Fire is the element that has been chosen to dispose of the mortal coil because it is considered as a messenger between the men and Gods. This last sacrament takes into account the sentiments and requirements of the dead and the serving, who are faced with the inevitable event of life, namely, death. The wise regard with and death as equal. The sublime sentiments expressed through the performance of this last sanskara, make death less unbearable for the individual who expires and the community that has to deal with it.

Thus it was believed that every period of man’s life was presided over by a deity and therefore whenever occasion arise, the deity was invoked to confer boons and blessings on the person concerned. Man who was over conscious of the Divine power above him found through these various ceremonies a way to express his acceptance of this Divine power and relicitation for all His Divine blessings.