

Sixteen Sanskars in Hinduism

Dr. Nandlal Naran Chhanga
Assistant Professor R.R. Lalan College, Bhuj
Email : ahirnandlal1989@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Sanskaras in Hinduism are rites of passage that begin with one's birth, celebrates certain early steps in a baby's growth and his or her welcome into the world in the presence of friends and family, then various stages of life (Ashrama (stage) such as first learning day, graduation from school, wedding and honeymoon, pregnancy, raising a family, as well as those related to final rites associated with cremation. These rites of passage are not uniform, and vary within the diverse traditions of Hinduism. Some may involve formal ceremonies, yajna (fire) ceremonies with the chanting of Vedic hymns. Others are simple, private affairs involving a couple, with or without friends, other family families or a religious person such as priest or pandit.

Sanskaras are not considered as end in themselves, but are means of social recognition as well as the passage of a person from one significant stage of life to another. Various elements of Sanskaras and rituals of life's passage are mentioned in Vedas of Hinduism, one of the oldest known scriptures in the world. The most extensive, but divergent discussions of these rites of passage are found in the numerous Dharmasutras and Grhyasutras from the 1st millennium BCE. Many of these rites of passage include formal ceremonies, with ritual readings of hymns, chants and ethical promises, aiming to orient the individual(s) to that which is considered part of dharmā (right, good, just, moral, true, spiritual, responsible, duties to family members or society in general), and essential actions such as those associated with last rites and cremation, charitable works, or out of sraddha or items of faith.

Key words : Sanskars,

INTRODUCTION

As per Hinduism, the Sanskar 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 Ashrama (i.e. stage of life). The Sanskar is said to be helping for achieving spiritual nourishment, peace of mind and ultimately moksha. Sanskar give a spiritual touch to the important events at different stages of a Hindu life – right from pre-birth to post-death.

Sanskaras are the turning points of life and need to be celebrated. Celebrations are very important ingredients of Sanskaras. 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. Sanskaras 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 Sanskaras of Hindus which cover the entire

life span of a person and take him to the door steps to Truth.

1. GARBHADHAN (CONCEPTION)

All sources recognize this as the first Sanskar. 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 Shastras. God characterizing parents are necessary for bringing up a good child in the world.

2. PUNSAVANA (FETUS PROTECTION)

This second sanskar 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 Vansha forward. Like the first Sanskar i.e. Garbhadhan, Punsavana Sanskar is also restricted to the family members.

3. SIMANTONAYANA (SATISFYING WISHES OF THE PREGNANT MOTHER)

This Sanskar 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 Sanskar is to free the expectant mother free from worries since the last 3 months are very difficult for pregnant woman- both physically and mentally. A Puja 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 Gita 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. JATAKARMA (BIRTH RITUALS)

Jaat-karma 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 Shashthi.

Goddess Shashthi is the protector of children. Jaat-karma is followed with Grah Puja, Homa.

5. NAMKARAN (NAME – GIVING)

This Sanskar is performed on the tenth, eleventh or twelfth day with recitation of Mantras. The baby child gets name on completion of this Sanskar, 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. NISHKRAMANA (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 Sanskar is to show obedience to the sun, moon, fire, wind etc, - the Panchmahabhut (Five elements). This is supposed to enhance the age and physical and mental development of the child.

7. ANNAPRASHANA (GIVING THE CHILD SOLID FOOD)

This sanskar 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 it to the child while reciting Prasad Mantras.

8. CHUDAKARANA OR MUNDAN (HAIR CUTTING)

This Sanskar is the first time cutting of hair on the child's head . 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 the. Brahmins chant Mantras for a healthy, long life of the child. This Sanskar is restricted to the family level.

9. KARNVEDH (EAR PIERCING)

This sanskar is performed in the third or fifth year, Piercing of the ears. With the commencement of Surya Puja; 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 OR YAGYOPAVEET (SACRED THREAD)

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

The ceremony has six parts: –

Puja: worshipping the Gods,

Havan: sacrifice,

Shiksha: teaching the morality and duties in life,

Bhiksha: begging as a renounced Brahmchari of Gurukula. Teacher's teaching has made him renounced minded that he has accepted a life of Vairagee,

Diksha: giving the most sacred Gayatri Mantra to the child, and

Blessings: child is bless by all Gods, Goddesses, ancestors, and elders

It is taking the child to the teacher for initiation of formal education. Along with the sacred thread, the hide of the

antelope called Krishnainam is also worn by the boy. The Upanayana ceremony is followed by brahmopadesha – teaching Gayatri mantra to the boy. (Cited in Manusmrti 2.27)

11. VEDARAMBHA (STUDY OF VEDAS AND SCRIPTURES)

This Sanskar is done along with Upanayana. Vedarambha is the learning of Vedas and Upanishads in ‘Gurukula’ or ‘Pathashala’. In the beginning of each academic period there is a ceremony called Upakarm 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. This is contrasted with a life of eating, sleeping and procreating, which kinds of life animals also live. The child is sent to Gurukul.

12. SAMAVARTANA (COMPLETING EDUCATION)

Samavartan is the ceremony associated with the end of formal education of Vedas in ‘Gurukul’. 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. VIVAHA (THE MARRIAGE)

This sanskar 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 walks around Agni hand in hand. The bride sacrifices grains in the fire and chants mantras.

14. VANPRASTHA (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 Grahastha Dharma and enters into Vanprastha Ashram (forest hermit). Man withdraws himself from all worldly activities, retires into the forest and prepares himself for taking sanyas. This is the life of a Vanprastha.

15. SANYASA

Before leaving the body a Hindu sheds all sense of responsibility & relationships to awake & revel in the

timeless truth. A sanyasi renounces the world and leads a life of study and meditation by living on alms.

16. ANTYESHTI (LAST RITE)

Antyeshti (literally, last rites), sometimes referred to as Antim-Sanskar, are the rituals associated with funeral. When death is imminent, a small piece of gold, tulsi leaf and drops of Ganga water are put in the mouth of the person on the death bed. The body is laid on the ground with the head towards the north. The eldest son generally performs the last rites before which he takes a purificatory bath amidst the chanting of mantras. 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.

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