

[SACRED SAMSKARAS](#)

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Hindu rites of passage sanctify the transitions of life from birth to death, invoking the grace of God and blessings from dear family and friends

The best rendering of samskara in English is made by the word "sacrament," which means "religious ceremony or act regarded as an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace." Sacrament also means "confirmation of some promise or oath; things of mysterious significance, sacred influence and symbol."

Sri Raj Bai Pandey, Hindu Samskaras

For the Hindu, life is a sacred journey, and every step from birth to death is marked, and thus acknowledged, through traditional ceremony, called samskara. Asamskarais an enduring impression etched into the malleable substance of

a person's mind at a psychological point in life. During these Hindu rites of passage, a temple or home ceremony deeply influences the soul and directs life along the path of dharma. There are many types of samskaras, from the rite prior to conception to the funeral ceremony. Each one, properly observed, empowers spiritual life, preserves religious culture and establishes bonds with inner worlds as the soul consciously accepts each succeeding discovery and duty in the order of God's creation. Religious samskaras serve two purposes. First, they mark clearly within our minds the occasion of an important life transition. Second, they solicit special blessings from the devas and Deities, society and village, family and friends. These blessings and feelings of love have a markedly positive effect, stabilizing the mind so that the deeper meanings of life can unfold within us. Of the many Hindu samskaras, eight are illustrated and described below.

Anna Prasana, First Solid Food

During the Anna Prasana Samskara, solid food is fed to the child for the first time. This is done by the father or the mother in the temple or at home. The choice of food, such as rice, offered to a child at this crucial time of life is said to help forge his or her destiny.

Karnavedha, Ear-Piercing

The ear-piercing ceremony, for both boys and girls, is performed in the temple or the home, generally on the child's first birthday. Health benefits

are said to derive from this ceremony.

Vidyarambha, Learning Commencement

The official beginning of the child's education is performed in the home or temple, during the fourth year, when he or she writes the first letter of

the alphabet in a tray
filled with uncooked rice.

Chudakarana, Head-Shaving

Ceremonial
head-shaving is
usually performed
before the end of the

third year in the home or temple. The shaven head denotes purity and egolessness and is said to mitigate past life karma.

Upanayana, Initiation

The ceremonial presentation of the sacred thread is performed in the temple or home between the ages of 9 and 15, when a boy begins the study of the Vedas. Thereafter, he is considered

"twice-born."

Vivaha, Marriage

The marriage
ceremony is
performed in a

temple or special
hall around the
sacred homa fire.
Lifetime vows and
seven steps
before God and
the Gods
consecrate the
holy union of
husband and wife.

Antyesti, Funeral

The funeral ceremony is performed or arranged by the relatives

according to
local traditions.
It includes
preparation of
the body,
cremation, rites
of mourning,
purification and
rememberance.

Eight Minor Hindu Samskaras

In addition to
the primary

rites of
passage
described and
illustrated
here, there is a
rich collection
of other
traditional

samskaras
ranging from
complex to
simple, from
prominent to
obscure, from
current to
obsolete. Here

is a sampling.

Kesanta Kala

When a boy
first shaves his
facial hair, this
indication that

he has come of
age is
celebrated in
the temple or
at home with
the Kesanta
Samskara. It is
a joyous time

of gift-giving ,
yet it is serious
as well. Often
a vow of
brahmachariya
(celibacy) is
taken at this
same time.

Ritu Kala

As puberty
dawns for a
young girl, the
ritu kala

home-ceremony is performed to acknowledge her first menses. New clothing, jewelry and

her first sari
are given as
she joyously
and openly
joins the young
adult
community.

Samavartana

This
ceremony--literally, "returning home from the

house of the
guru"--marks
the end of
studentship
and indicates
formal closure
to the
brahmacharya

period of life.
The young
person now
must choose
one of two
paths: the
grihastha path
(family life) or

the renunciate
path (monastic
life).

Nischitartha or Vagdana

This is the
betrothal
ceremony in

which a man
and woman
are declared
formally
engaged by
their parents
with the
exchange of

jewelry and
gifts. Based on
this
commitment,
they and their
families begin
planning a
shared future.

Pumsavana

The literal
meaning of the
term
pumsavana is

"the quickening of a male child."
Not practiced today, this ceremony was performed by the husband

for the wife
beseeching the
birth of a son,
primarily as an
assurance for
the
continuance of
the family line.

Simantonnayana

This is the
"hair-parting"
rite. Not

commonly
practiced
today, this
ancient
ceremony of
parting the
hair of the
pregnant wife

was performed
to bring cheer
as well as ward
off evil spirits.

Jatakarma

During the
later days of
pregnancy, a
woman may

have the
Jatakarma
samskara
performed.
This rite, based
on a verse
from the
Atharva Veda

written
specifically to
assure safe
child birth, was
designed to
yield blessings
for life as well
as protection

from harm for
both mother
and child.

Vedarambha

A hundred
years ago,
when a young
brahmin began

his Vedic studies, this initiation was common. In recent times, however, with the growing importance,

popularity and
use of
non-Vedic
liturgy, this
practice is
fading into
obscurity,
except among

priests.