Samskaras
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Samskaras

Every culture consecrates the milestones of life with ritual and festivity.

What Are Hinduism's Rites of Passage?

Hindus celebrate life's crucial junctures by holy sacraments, or rites of passage, called samskaras, which impress the subconscious mind, inspire family and community sharing and invoke the Gods' blessings. Aum.

For the Hindu, life is a sacred journey in which each milestone, marking major biological and emotional stages, is consecrated through sacred ceremony. Family and friends draw near, lending support, advice and encouragement. Through Vedic rites and mantras, family members or priests invoke the Gods for blessings and protection during important turning points, praying for the individual's spiritual and social development. There are many sacraments, from the rite of conception to the funeral ceremony. Each one, properly observed, empowers spiritual life and preserves Hindu culture, as the soul consciously accepts each succeeding discovery and duty in the order of God's creation. The essential samskaras are the rites of conception, the three-month blessing, hair-parting, birth, name-giving, head-shaving, first feeding, ear-piercing, first learning, puberty, marriage, elders' vows and last rites. The holy Vedas proclaim, "From Him come hymns, songs and sacrificial formulas, initiations, sacrifices, rites and all offerings. From Him come the year, the sacrificer and the worlds in which the moon shines forth, and the sun." Aum Namah Sivaya.

What Are the Sacraments of Childhood?

The essential religious sacraments of childhood are the namakarana,

name-giving; chudakarana, head-shaving; annaprashana, first solid food; karnavedha, ear-piercing; and vidyarambha, commencement of formal study. Aum.

Samskaras impress upon a child its holiness and innate possibilities for spiritual advancement. The namakarana occurs in the temple or home, eleven to forty-one days after birth. The baby's name, astrologically chosen, is whispered in the right ear by the father, marking the formal entry into Hinduism. The head-shaving, chudakarana, is performed at the temple between the thirty-first day and the fourth year. The annaprashana celebrates the child's first solid food, when sweet rice is fed to the baby by the father or the family guru. Ear-piercing, karnavedha, held for both girls and boys during the first, third or fifth year, endows the spirit of health and wealth. Girls are adorned with gold earrings, bangles and anklets; boys with two earrings and other gold jewelry. The vidyarambha begins formal education, when children write their first letter in a tray of rice. The upanayana begins, and the samavartana ends, a youth's religious study. The Vedas beseech, "I bend to our cause at this solemn moment, O Gods, your divine and holy attention. May a thousand streams gush forth from this offering, like milk from a bountiful, pasture-fed cow." Aum Namah Sivaya.

What Are the Sacraments of Adulthood?

The most important sacrament of adulthood is the vivaha samskara, or marriage rite, preceded by a pledge of betrothal. A boy's or girl's coming of age is also consecrated through special ceremony in the home. Aum.

As puberty dawns, the ritu kala home-ceremony acknowledges a girl's first menses, and the keshanta kala celebrates a boy's first beard-shaving. New clothing and jewelry fit for royalty are presented to and worn by the youth, who is joyously welcomed into the young adult community. Girls receive their first sari, boys their first razor. Chastity is vowed until marriage. The next sacrament is the betrothal ceremony, called nishchitartha or vagdana, in which a man and woman are declared formally engaged by their parents with the exchange of jewelry and other gifts. Based on this commitment, they and their families begin planning a shared future. In the marriage sacrament, or vivaha, seven steps before God and Gods and tying the wedding pendant consecrate the union of husband and wife. This sacrament is performed before the homa fire in a wedding hall or temple and is occasioned by elaborate celebration. The Grihya Sutras pronounce, "One step for

strength, two steps for vitality, three steps for prosperity, four steps for happiness, five steps for cattle, six steps for seasons, seven steps for friendship. To me be devoted." Aum Namah Sivaya.

What Are the Child-Bearing Sacraments?

The essential child-bearing samskaras are the garbhadhana, rite of conception; the punsavana, third-month blessing; the simantonnaya, hair-parting ceremony; and the jatakarma, welcoming the new-born child. Aum.

Conception, pregnancy's crucial stages and birth itself are all sanctified through sacred ceremonies performed privately by the husband. In the rite of conception, garbhadhana, physical union is consecrated through prayer, mantra and invocation with the conscious purpose of bringing a high soul into physical birth. At the first stirring of life in the womb, in the rite called punsavana, special prayers are intoned for the protection and safe development of child and mother. Between the fourth and seventh months, in the simantonnaya, or hair-parting sacrament, the husband lovingly combs his wife's hair, whispers sweet words praising her beauty and offers gifts of jewelry to express his affection and support. Through the jatakarma samskara, the father welcomes the newborn child into the world, feeding it a taste of honey and clarified butter and praying for its long life, intelligence and well-being. The Vedas proclaim, "That in which the prayers, the songs and formulas are fixed firm like spokes in the hub of a cartwheel, in which are interwoven the hearts of all beings-may that spirit be graciously disposed toward me!" Aum Namah Sivaya.

Are There Rites for the Wisdom Years?

Entrance into the elder advisor stage at age 48, the marriage renewal at age 60, and the dawn of renunciation at 72 may be signified by ceremony. Funeral rites, antyeshti, solemnize the transition called death. Aum Namah Sivaya.

Hindu society values and protects its senior members, honoring their experience and heeding their wise advice. Age 48 marks the entrance into the

vanaprastha ashrama, celebrated in some communities by special ceremony. At age 60, husband and wife reaffirm marriage vows in a sacred ablution ceremony called shashtyabda purti. Age 72 marks the advent of withdrawal from society, the sannyasa ashrama, sometimes ritually acknowledged but never confused with sannyasa diksha. The antyeshti, or funeral ceremony, is a home sacrament performed by the family, assisted by a priest. Rites include guiding the individual's transition into the higher planes, preparing the body, cremation, bone-gathering, dispersal of ashes, home purification and commemorative ceremonies, shraddha, one week, one month and one year from the day of death, and sometimes longer, according to local custom. Through the antyeshti, the soul is released to the holy feet of Siva. The Vedas counsel, "Attain your prime; then welcome old age, striving by turns in the contest of life. May the Ordainer, maker of good things, be pleased to grant you length of days." Aum Namah Sivaya.