

## [SACRED SAMSKARAS](#)

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### SACRED SAMSKARAS

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

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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. A samskara is 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.