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The *Samskāras* as rites of passage in Aryan way of life

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to reveal the idea of *samskāras* as rites of passage in Aryan way of life as conceived by the ancient sages of India. The idea of rites for different phases of human life is common to all cultures but in the Aryan culture, the entire path from birth to death is decked with very well thought out rituals that ensure a smooth transition from one phase of life to another in a psychologically and socially empowering manner. Besides, the mystical dimension that comes from the mantra chants, along with purification with water and fire ceremonies adds meaningful depth and symbolism to our routine existence on this earth. In the western cultures rites de passage is generally defined as leaving the familiar, transition and assimilation with return. The number of rites is considered to be five-birth, adulthood, marriage, eldership and ancestorship. However, in Aryan or Hindu way of life, at least sixteen rites are observed at various stages of a human life-cycle. In this paper, we shall look into these *samskāras*, their processes, function and significance.

Key Words: *Samskāras*, rites of passage, Hindu, *Manusmṛiti*

Introduction

Ancient Indian masters conceived rites of passage for an individual's life journey on this earth in an extremely insightful framework to organize a smooth structure and functioning of life at social, religious, and personal levels. There are sixteen important junctures in the course of a Hindu's life known as *Ṣoḍaśa-samskāras*, the sixteen *samskāras* or Hindu rite de passage.

The word '*samskāra*' (root '*kr*', prefix '*sama*' and suffix '*ghian*') literally means purification, cleansing and refinement.

Sage Pāṇini believed that the *samskāras* are the ornaments that embellish an individual's character and personality. They symbolically mark each and every important stage in one's life from birth, childhood, youth, marriage, old age, death and enable age and enable an individual to live a fulfilling life complete with happiness and contentment at personal as well as at socio-religious level. Ancient sages and thinkers understood that merely physical and material attainments can't impart complete satisfaction in life. So they framed a life according to *samskāras*, which involve ritual action to ascribe meaningful movement from one life phase to another. The *samskāras* illumine the function and role that an individual has to play in each phase. Thus, they also serve as tools of discipline that guide and individual's mind, intellect and emotions through their journey of life on the earth as social beings and responsible citizens. It is believed that Hindu-*samskāras* help an individual to exonerate from sins and vices, but also purify their consciousness and even correction of physical deformities, if any.

The Upanishads mention *samskāras* as a means to grow and prosper in all four pursuits of human existence famous as *puruṣārtha catuṣṭaya* - *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*.

The detailed explanation of *samskāras* is found in *Smṛiti* texts and in the *Gr̥hyasūtras*. However, the *Gr̥hyasūtras* differ on names as well as number of *samskāras*. Sage Āśvalāyana lays down eleven *samskāras*. Sages Baudhāyana, Pāraskar and Varāh talk about only thirteen *samskāras*. Sage Vaikhāna and sage Gautam describe forty *samskāras* in their respective *dharamasūtras*. However, the sixteen *samskāras* expounded by sage Vyāsa have gained roots over centuries and Swami Dayananda, the founder of Arya Samaj acknowledges the number to be sixteen only:

*garbhādyā mṛtyuparyantaḥ samskāraḥ ṣoḍaśaiva hi
vākṣyante taṃ namaskṛtyānantavidyaṃ paramēṣvaram//Samskāraavidhi. Verse 2.*

It is believed that without the *saṃskāras*, the human life is gross as *saṃskāras* provide moral and ethical foundation for a good life. Besides, the sixteen *saṃskāras* ensure complete development of a child from birth, education and character building in the *brahmacarya āśrama*. Later the *saṃskāras* prepare the ground for fulfillment of desires, passions and aspirations (*kāma* and *artha*) in the *gṛhastha āśrama*. In the third phase of life, the *vānaprastha āśrama* they lead to fulfillment of *dharma* and finally to attainment of *mokṣa* in the fourth phase of *sanyāsa āśrama*.

Here these four divisions suggest as a general layout, in deeper sense, *dharma* is the chief underlying principle in all the four stages of Hindu life. Out of the sixteen major *saṃskāras*, three take place before the birth itself. These *prākjanma saṃskāras* are conducted to promote conception, to have a male child and for the safety of the child in the womb.

The rites after the birth are calibrated to initiate a child of Aryan society into a auspiciously balanced and harmonious life of contentment, abundance and peace from childhood through youth, old age and death. Only the twice-born (*dwijā-s*) had the rite to these *saṃskāras*. Some of the Smṛti composers like Manu grant the rites for women and śūdras but without the chanting of Vedic mantras.

Sage Manu says

*Amantrikā tu karyeyam strīṇām saṃskāro vaidikāḥ
smṛtaḥ/
saṃskārārtham śarīrasya yathākāle yathākramam//
[Manusmṛti 2.66]*

That means entire sequence of rites must be performed for women, in order to purify the body, at the proper time and in the proper order, but without the recitation of mantras.

The sixteen rites come with elaborate ritual practices that involve not only the recitation of Vedic mantras but also fire ceremonies of varied scales. We shall look briefly at these.

1. Garbhādhāna saṃskāra (Ritual for conception): Also known as *niṣeka*, this is a ritual for conception of healthy child. In the Vedic belief, the purpose of conjugal union after marriage is for conception of a child for the propagation of race. Appropriate time and atmosphere is prescribed in the texts for this act. The fourth nights after the onset of menstrual cycle until the sixteenth night are considered to be suitable for this purpose. Sex is forbidden in the daytime.

Sage Yājñavalkya says:

*ṣoḍaśacaturṇiśaḥ strīṇāma tasmīnyumāsu saṃviśet/
brahmacāryaiva parvāṇādyāścṛtasnastu varjayet//
[Yājñavalkya Smṛti.1.79]*

There are sixteen nights for women (as conceiving time). Out of these the even numbered nights are good for conceiving a male child. A man who mates a woman during the prescribed nights is considered to be a *brahmacārī*. Lord Prajāpati is invoked and appeased in this ritual.

2. Punsavana saṃskāra (Rite for Procurement of Male-child): This is the fertilization ritual performed in the third month of the pregnancy that includes mantras for birth of a male child and also for the safety of the fetus in the womb.

3. Seemāntonnayan saṃskāra (Rite of Parting of the hair or Baby shower): This is a rite to offer respect and care for the carrying mother. Moreover, it was a common belief that evil spirits can influence pregnant women. So this rite is also done to ward off evil spirits and is observed in the penultimate month of pregnancy for the safe and assured delivery of the baby.

4. Jātakarma saṃskāra (birth-ceremony): The birth ceremony of new born is observed before cutting of the umbilical cord. A.L.Basham describes that, “*Jātakarma* involved he whispering of sacred spells (mantra) in the baby’s ear, placing a mixture of honey and ghee in his mouth, and giving him a name, to be kept secret by his parents until his initiation.” [Basham: 2004: p-161]. Specific mantras are chanted during the period of labour, then birth and first breast-feeding. The place where the child is born on the earth is touched and prayers and chants are offered to that place. A small *havana* is performed at the threshold and offerings are put into the fire. Morning goddess (*savitā*) is also offered prayers.

5. Nāmakaraṇa saṃskāra (Rite for naming the child)- Finding an appropriate name according to the rules laid down in scriptures is an act of high significance in a Hindu household because it is said that a name is the instrument for all transactions in the world and from name itself a man attains fame and glory. (*Nāmākhilasya vyavahāra hetuḥ...nāmnaiva kirtim labhate manuṣyaḥ*). With this rite a newborn is given identity. It is interesting how sage Manu describes the rules of naming people of four *varṇas* along with those of women.

For the four classes, he says

*mangalyam brāhmaṇasya syātksatriyasya balanvitam/
vaiśyasya dhanasamyuktam śūdrasya tu jugupsitam//
2.31*

[A Brahmana's name must denote auspiciousness, a Kshatriya's should denote power, and a Vaiśya's name should be connected with wealth, however, a Śūdra's should be contemptible.]

And for women, the names should be:

*strīṇām sukhodyamakrūrām vispaṣṭārtham manoharam/
mangalyam dīrghavarṇāntam-āśīrvādābhīdhānavat//
2.33*

“Women’s names should be easy to pronounce, should not be frightful, should be clear in meaning, be pleasing and auspicious, must end in long vowels, and contain a word of blessing.” [Manusmṛti. 2011: 20].

6. Niṣkramaṇa saṃskāra (rite of child’s first outing to see the sun): Four month year old child is taken out for the first time for a sun-bath. Child is bathed and clothed in new clothes and is taken out for *Surya-darśana*. The *Candra darśana* is performed in the third month. The idea is to introduce the child to nature and to stars and constellations.

7. Annaprāśana saṃskāra (rice-feeding ceremony). It is an elaborate ceremony conducted when the child is fed cereal for the first time at the age of six-months.

The child grows on breast milk for first five to six months but after that it needs solid food and other nutrients. Rice pudding is fed to the child in a ceremonial space. Other dimensions have been added to this rite. Objects like bow and arrow, writing instruments, books, money, weighing balance etc. - that symbolize various professions are kept in front of the child. Out of these whatever the child touches of his own choice that is supposed to give a general idea about his/her future profession.

8. Cūdākarāṇa or Caulkarma (tonsure or forming the crest): This ritual is ceremonious tonsuring of the head of the baby with prayers to Brahma. A tuft of hair is left at the crown of the head and rest of the head is shaven clean. This tuft of hair is called as *Cūdā* hence the name *Cūdākarāṇa*. It is believed that this act of tonsuring brings joy, auspiciousness, enthusiasm and long life to the child. It is prescribed for the first or the third year of age. Sometimes it is conjoined with the *Upanayana* ceremony in the fifth or seventh year.

9. Karaṇavedha (piercing the ear): This *saṃskāra* has been in practice since the Vedic times. It was performed mainly for beautification and embellishment, but these days the science testifies to its efficacy in opening certain brain centers. With a gold or copper needle, first the right ear and then the left ear is pierced then gold rings are used to adorn the ears. This is performed in third, fifth or seventh year.

10. Vidyārambha or Akṣarārambha (Beginning the alphabet): This *saṃskāra* is conducted in the fifth year when the child is ready to learn the alphabet. At an auspicious time the teacher would write AUM or sign of Svastik and initiate the child into the *varṇamāla* (garland of letters). Lord Gaṇeśa, Goddess Sarasvatī and the family deity are invoked and propitiated in this ritual worship. This rite was meant to teach the script and numbers and make him ready for the study of Vedas that would commence with the *Upanayana*.

11. Upanayana and Vedārambha Saṃskāra (investiture of sacred thread ceremony): When child goes near to the Acarya for study, he is given the sacred thread, the *Yajñopavīta*. The right to *Yajñopavīta* is given only to the first three castes- Brahmin, Kṣatriya, and Vaiśya. These three are called as *Dwija*- the twice born. *Upanayana* is denied to a Sūdra and so is the study of the Vedas.

Upanayana is the initiation where the child is given the sacred-thread. The sacred thread has immense importance in the Hindu way of life. The investiture ceremony of sacred thread through this *saṃskāra* gives the right of Vedic Study to the child. During the ceremony, the Acarya chants the *Gāyatrī* mantra from the ancient Rig-Veda into child's ear. This sacred thread symbolizes leaving behind the unstructured life of a kid and adopting a life of a student with discipline and responsibility as a celibate *brahmachārin*. A.L.Basham offers interesting comments in this regard:

“In this initiation ceremony there was little or no trace of overt sexual symbolism, and it was never thought of, like circumcision and other initiation ceremonies among more primitive peoples, as a rite fitting the initiate for a sexual life. The initiated boy was a still a minor, but he had taken the status of an Arya, and it was now his duty to master the

religious lore of the Aryans in order to prepare himself for the role of a householder. As a *brahmachārin* or religious student he had as yet several years of celibacy before him.” [Basham: 2004:165].

In ancient times women were also initiated into study of Vedas but in medieval period, women's education suffered a setback.

12. Samāvartana (Student Returning home after completion of education): In the Gurukul culture, when a student completes his study, he becomes a *snātaka* (lit. one who has bathed). Another name for this rite is *snāna*. At the completion of studies, celibate student takes permission of his Acarya to end his celibate life and offers *guru-dakṣiṇā* to his teacher. Then he relegates all the accouterments of his celibate student life which include danda (*brahmachārin's* stick), *mekhalā* (belt or girdle), *uttarīya* (upper garment), *kaupīn* (loin cloth) etc., takes ritual bath (*snānam*) and wears new clothes that suit his new demeanor as an adult ready to enter householders life. Now he can use embellishments like perfume, shoes, garlands, kohl, turban, gold ornaments etc. that were forbidden in his celibate life. Acarya presents him to the assembly of learned scholars and he is introduced as a graduate or bachelor. There are three kinds of graduates: *vratasnātaka*- a student who could not complete the education but kept the vow of celibacy; *vidyāsnātaka*- a student who completed the education but could not properly keep the vow of celibacy; *vidyāvratasnātaka*- a student who abides by the vow of celibacy and also completes his education. The latter is revered as the best. In a very superficial manner, the *samāvartana* ceremony can be compared with the modern day convocation ceremony of a student after completion of bachelor's degree.

13. Vivāh Saṃskāra (Marriage ceremony): This rite is a recognition and sanctification of the most innate human tendency, which is sex. This natural desire if unrefined and unchecked can place a man in animal category and when the same instinct is disciplined and channeled then it becomes a source of joy, beauty and creativity in life. Indian sages and thinkers have assimilated 'desire' (Kama) into the scheme of four puruṣārthas and given it a sacred space in human life. *Vivāh Saṃskāra* is entry into the life of a householder which is the second phase of Hindu life known as *grhastha āśrama*. There are eight kinds of *vivāhas* recognized in the scriptures (for ex. the *Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra*, and *Viṣṇu-purāṇa*). These are: *Brāhama-Vivāha*- the girl is given to a man of the same class who is invited by the father of the girl; *Daiva-Vivāha*- father offers the daughter to a priest as a part of offering of a sacrifice; *Ārṣa-Vivāha*- father takes the bride-price of a cow and bull and gives his daughter to a Brahmin who brings these offerings; *Prājāpatya-Vivāha*- father gives the daughter without any bride price of dowry; *Āsura-Vivāha*-marriage where the bride is purchased; *Gāndharva-Vivāha*- a clandestine marriage between two lovers is sanctified by this ritual; *Rākṣa-Vivāha*- the bride is captured or abducted; *Paiśāca-Vivāha*- seduction and rape of girl without her consent in drunken state is sanctified by this rite.

Generally, this rite of marriage ensures an entry into *grhastha āśrama* in a ceremonious manner. The *grhastha āśrama* is supposed to be the most important amongst the four *āśramas* as the other three *āśramas* are dependent on *grhastha* for their material needs. Here, a young educated

individual is initiated into the responsibilities of worldly life with full awareness of his/her role or *dharma* as a *grhasthin*.

14. Vivāhāgni-parigraha

15. Tretāgni-sangrah

There are two other *samskāras* that are related to the *vivāh samskāra* itself. These are called as *vivāhāgni-parigraha* (hospitable marriage-reception) and *tretāgni-sangrah* (conservation of three sacred fires viz. *grāhpatya-agni*, *dakṣiṇa-agni* and *āhavāneeya-agni*).

16. Antyeshti samskāra (Funeral ceremony): The last site, the sixteenth- *samskāra* is performed when one leaves the body. When an individual has completed the journey of life then this *samskāra* is performed at time of death. It is called as *antyeshti samskāra*.

Thus, one can see that Hindu conception of human life-cycle appears to be an extremely well thought out and scientific system of initiation and channelization of an individual's life through education, fulfillment of human desires, contentment through inner pursuits and finally to salvation at the end of life.

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