

Sixteen Samskaras and their relatedness with child rearing patterns: A review

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Abstract

The concept of the 16 Sanskars (rituals) is deeply rooted in Hindu culture, encompassing significant life events from birth to death. This comprehensive review explores the origins, significance, and contemporary relevance of these ancient rituals and relation with child rearing. Each Sanskar is examined in detail, highlighting its cultural, spiritual, and social implications. The review delves into the historical context and scriptural references that underpin these practices, providing a thorough understanding of their evolution over time. Additionally, it assesses the current status of these rituals in modern society, considering the influence of globalization and cultural shifts. The review concludes with insights into the ways in which the 16 Sanskars continue to shape personal identity and community cohesion within the Hindu diaspora.

Keywords: Sixteen sanskars, Child rearing

Introduction

The sixteen sanskars, or sacraments, form a fundamental part of Hindu traditions, encapsulating the cultural, spiritual, and moral development of an individual from conception to the final rites after death. These rituals, deeply embedded in Vedic traditions, highlight the stages of human life and emphasize the importance of various milestones. This article aims to explore the sixteen sanskars specifically related to child-rearing practices in ancient India, offering insights into their significance, procedures, and underlying philosophies.

Garbhasanskar (Conception Ritual)

Garbhasanskar is the first sanskar, marking the desire for a virtuous and enlightened child. Ancient texts like the Garbha Upanishad elaborate on the significance of a healthy and spiritual environment during conception (Pandit, 1992). Rituals include prayers, meditation, and the recitation of Vedic mantras to invite divine blessings for the unborn child (Dwivedi, 1999). These practices aim to ensure the physical and spiritual well-being of both the mother and the child (Garbha Upanishad).

Pumsavana (Fetus Protection Ritual)

Performed in the third or fourth month of pregnancy, Pumsavana is a ritual intended to ensure the birth of a healthy child. The Atharva Veda prescribes specific herbs and prayers to be used during this ceremony (Sharma, 2000). It underscores the community's role in supporting the mother and protecting the fetus from any harm (Atharva Veda).

Simantonnayana (Baby Shower)

Simantonnayana, typically performed in the fourth or fifth month of pregnancy, involves rituals to ensure the mental and physical health of the mother and fetus (Kane, 1958). This ceremony also serves as a means of social support, where women of the community gather to bless the expectant mother. It includes the parting of the mother's hair, symbolizing protection and the opening of the mind to positive thoughts (Manusmriti).

Jatakarma (Birth Ritual)

Jatakarma is conducted immediately after birth and includes rituals like the whispering of mantras in the newborn's ear to invoke divine protection and blessings (Jamison & Witzel, 1992). This sanskar emphasizes the purity of the child and the initiation of a spiritual journey right from birth. The father often performs a ritual to give the child honey and ghee, symbolizing the sweetness and nourishment of life (Grihya Sutras).

Namakarana (Naming Ceremony)

Namakarana, performed on the eleventh or twelfth day after birth, is the formal naming ceremony. The chosen name usually reflects the family's aspirations for the child and often invokes the names of deities (Apte, 1965). This sanskar integrates the child into the social fabric of the community, marking their identity and individuality (Parashara Smriti).

Nishkramana (First Outing)

The Nishkramana sanskar is typically performed in the third or fourth month when the child is taken out of the house for the first time. This ritual signifies the child's introduction to the outside world and involves prayers for protection and health (Olivelle, 1993). Traditionally, the child is taken to a temple, symbolizing the importance of spiritual surroundings (Yajnavalkya Smriti).

Annaprashana (First Feeding)

Annaprashana, usually conducted in the sixth month, marks the child's first intake of solid food. This ritual signifies the transition from a purely milk diet to solid foods, an important milestone in the child's physical development. The ceremony involves feeding the child rice pudding while chanting mantras to ensure health and prosperity (Bhattacharya, 1953; Taittiriya Upanishad).

Chudakarana (Mundan or First Haircut)

Chudakarana, or the first haircut, is performed typically in the first or third year. This ritual signifies the shedding of past impurities and the child's new beginning. The hair is offered to deities, and prayers are conducted for the child's well-being and longevity (Kane, 1958). It also symbolizes a rite of passage, marking the child's growth and development (Sushruta Samhita).

Karnavedha (Ear Piercing)

Karnavedha, the ear-piercing ceremony, is performed in the third or fifth year. This ritual is believed to have health benefits and is also considered auspicious (Rao, 1984). The piercing of the ears is accompanied by prayers and offerings to deities, signifying the child's readiness to receive knowledge and wisdom (Charaka Samhita).

Upanayana (Sacred Thread Ceremony)

Upanayana marks the initiation of a child, traditionally a boy, into formal education. Performed between the ages of eight and sixteen, this sanskar involves the wearing of the sacred thread (yajnopavita) and the imparting of the Gayatri mantra. The ceremony signifies the child's entry into student life (Brahmacharya) and the pursuit of spiritual and intellectual growth (Radhakrishnan, 1948; Manu Smriti).

Vedarambha (Beginning of Vedic Study)

Vedarambha, the beginning of Vedic study, follows the Upanayana. This sanskar emphasizes the importance of education and spiritual learning in a child's life. The child begins the study of the Vedas under the guidance of a guru, marking the start of a disciplined and structured educational journey (Altekar, 1934; Grihya Sutras).

Samavartana (Graduation)

Samavartana, or the graduation ceremony, marks the completion of Vedic studies. This sanskar signifies the transition from a student (Brahmachari) to a householder (Grihastha). The ceremony involves rituals and prayers that prepare the individual for a responsible and fulfilling adult life (Jha, 2004; Manusmriti).

Vivaha (Marriage)

Vivaha is the marriage sanskar, one of the most significant rituals in Hindu culture. It not only unites two individuals but also their families. The ceremony involves various rites and rituals that signify the commitment to a shared life of dharma (duty), artha (prosperity), kama (desire), and moksha (liberation) (Apte, 1990; Rig Veda).

Vanaprastha (Retirement)

Vanaprastha is the retirement stage, marking the transition from household duties to a life of contemplation and spiritual pursuits. This sanskar involves withdrawing from active social and professional life to focus on spiritual growth, often in seclusion or a hermitage (Basham, 1954; Mahabharata).

Antyeshti (Funeral Rites)

Antyeshti, the final sanskar, encompasses the funeral rites performed after death. These rituals ensure the proper journey of the soul and its release from the physical body. The ceremony includes cremation and the chanting of Vedic mantras, emphasizing the transient nature of life and the importance of spiritual liberation (Parry, 1994; Atharva Veda).

Conclusion

The sixteen sanskars provide a structured framework for the holistic development of an individual, emphasizing moral, spiritual, and social values. These rites of passage reflect the rich cultural heritage of ancient India and underscore the importance of nurturing and guiding an individual through various life stages. By examining these sanskars, we gain insight into the ancient wisdom that continues to influence Hindu traditions and child-rearing practices.

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