

## Hindu Saṁskāras

(By: Vijai Singhal)

**Saṁskāras** are sacraments or holy rites of passage that guide us about our responsibilities in life. There are some 40 Saṁskāras for different milestones in life from the rite of conception to the last rites. Some of the important Saṁskāras are briefly described here. For much fuller and detailed coverage of the subject, please refer to the following links:

1. Hindu Saṁskāras by Pandit Shri Rama RamanujaAchari :  
<https://www.australiancouncilofhinduclergy.com/books-and-publications.html>
2. Rites of Passage by Himalayan Academy  
[www.hinduismtoday.com/pdf.../what.../WIH\\_Sec5\\_Chapter39.pdf](http://www.hinduismtoday.com/pdf.../what.../WIH_Sec5_Chapter39.pdf)

**Sīmantonayana** - is performed between the sixth and eighth month of pregnancy. Family takes special care of expectant mother during pregnancy because the physical and mental development of the foetus is dependent on mother's health. The mother is advised to eat fresh, wholesome, nutritious food, read inspiring books, listen to good music and have good positive thoughts. She is encouraged to avoid negative feelings of anger, hatred, jealousy, violence. What she eats, drinks, thinks, watches, hears, reads affect the baby very much. However, this ceremony is not very common these days.

**Nāmakaran** - Naming or name-giving ceremony is the first ceremony after the birth of the child. It is performed in the home or the temple, usually when the child is 11 to 40 days old. The father or the aunt (father's sister) whispers the infant's name in his/her right ear. Family and friends give gifts. The priest suggests the first alphabet of the name based on the *Naksatra*(star). Some parents select the names based on names of Hindu gods and goddesses or some heroes to instil those qualities in the child.

**Anna-Prāśana** - The child is weaned at the age of six months. Solid food is fed to the child for the first time. Some sweet rice is usually offered to the family deity or to Annapurna Devi and a morsel is fed to the baby with mantras for ensuring health and longevity and protection.

**Chudakarana (Mundan)** - Head-shaving ceremony is usually performed before the end of the third year in home or temple. The cut hair is gathered into a large 'roti' made of dough, wrapped up and disposed of in a river or buried.

**Vidyarambha**- This sacrament is performed to mark the beginning of the education. It is performed when the child first goes to school. The child is bathed, dressed in new clothes and fed. Ganeśa and Sarasvati are invoked and worshipped, after facing east the child is taught to write the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet holding a piece of gold — usually a ring — in a plate of rice.

**Upanayana** - The sacred thread ceremony is also known as *Yagnopaveet*. The sacred thread has three strands to remind the child of his responsibilities towards the Guru, parents, and the

community. This ceremony is mainly performed in the Brahmin families and is not very common these days.

**Vivāh** - marriage ceremony is performed in a temple or special hall around the sacred *homafire*. Lifetime vows are taken and seven steps (*Saptapadi*) are taken around the fire with the priest explaining the meanings of the vows. The holy union of husband and wife is consecrated. This has become one of the biggest ceremonies these days.

**Antyeshti** - The funeral ceremony is performed by the relatives of the deceased. It includes preparation of the body, cremation, rites of mourning, purification and remembrance. The eldest son or the grandson, traditionally performs the last rites. The funeral should take place as soon as possible—traditionally, by the next dusk or dawn, whichever occurs first. A priest should be contacted and can help guide in the decision-making process and direct the family to a Hindu-friendly funeral services.

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