

16 Sanskaras Samskaras

Hindus believe that every aspect of life is sacred. That is why each significant stage, from conception to cremation, is celebrated as a reminder that life is a gift from God which should be duly respected and lived according to His wishes. This is the first installment describing the significance of the 16 Samskaras.

Since eternity man has strived to improve his own self. This realisation, unique only to mankind, has led him to think deeper about his physical, mental and spiritual well being. Towards this end, the Vedic seers prescribed a set of observances, known as Samskaras. (Though pronounced Sanskaras in Gujarati, we shall use the original Sanskrit form.)

The nearest English word for samskara is sacrament, related to the phrase 'rite of passage'. In the Oxford English Dictionary, sacrament is defined as a "religious ceremony or act regarded as an outward and visible sign of inward or spiritual grace." In classical Sanskrit literature texts, such as Raghuvamsha, Kumarsambhava, Abhijnan-Shakuntal, Hitopadesha and Manu Smruti, samskara is used to mean: education, cultivation, training, refinement, perfection, grammatical purity, polishing, embellishment, decoration, a purificatory rite, a sacred rite, consecration, sanctification, effect of past actions (karmas), merit of karmas, etc.

A general definition of samskara, encompassing nearly all of the above is "to improve upon something while removing its undesirable attributes."

Purpose of Samskaras

(1) **Cultural.** The variety of rites and rituals related to the samskaras help in the formation and development of personality. In the Parashar Smruti it is said, "Just as a picture is painted with various colors, so the character of a person is formed by undergoing various samskaras." Thus, the Hindu sages realised the need of consciously guiding and molding the character of individuals, instead of letting them grow in a haphazard manner.

(2) **Spiritual.** According to the seers, samskaras impart a higher sanctity to life. Impurities associated with the material body are eradicated by performing samskaras. The whole body is consecrated and made a fit dwelling place for the atma. According to the Atri Smruti a man is born a Shudra; by performing the Upanayana Samskara he becomes a Dvija (twice born); by acquiring the Vedic lore he becomes a Vipra (an inspired poet); and by realising Brahman (God) he becomes a Brahmin. The samskaras are a form of spiritual endeavor (sadhana) - an external discipline for internal spiritual edification. Thus, the entire life of a Hindu is one grand sacrament.

The Isha Upanishad reveals that the final goal of the samskaras, by observing the rites and rituals is "to transcend the bondage of samsara and cross the ocean of death." To this we can add that after transcending the cycle of births and deaths, the atma attains Paramatma - the Lord Purushottam.

Although the number of samskaras prescribed by various scriptures vary, we shall consider the sixteen that are a consensus among scholars:

Pre-natal Samskaras

- (1) Garbhadan (Conception)
- (2) Pumsavana (Engendering a male issue)
- (3) Simantonayana (Hair-parting)

Childhood Samskaras

- (4) Jatakarma (Birth rituals)
- (5) Namakarana (Name-giving)
- (6) Nishkrama (First outing)
- (7) Annaprashana (First feeding)
- (8) Chudakarma (or Chaul) (Shaving of head)
- (9) Karnavedh (Piercing the earlobes)

Educational Samskaras

- (10) Vidyardmbha (Learning the alphabet)
- (11) Upanayana (Sacred thread initiation)
- (12) Vedarambha (Beginning Vedic study)
- (13) Keshant (Godaan) (Shaving the beard)
- (14) Samavartan (End of studentship)

Marriage Samskara

- (15) Vivaha (Marriage Ceremony)

Death Samskara

- (16) Antyeshti (Death rites).

Pre-natal Samskaras

(1) Garbhadan (Conception)

'Garbha' means womb. 'Dan' means donation. In this the man places his seed in a woman. The Gruhyasutras and Smrutis advocate special conditions and observances for this, to ensure healthy and intelligent progeny. Procreation of children was regarded as necessary for paying off debts to the forefathers. Another reason for having progeny is given in the Taittiriya Upanishad. When the student ends his Vedic studies, he requests permission to leave from his

teacher (see Samskara 14). The teacher then blesses him with some advice which he should imbibe for life. One of the commands is:

"Prajaatantu ma vyavyachchhetseehi..."

(Shikshavalli, Anuvak 11.11)

"Do not terminate one's lineage - let it continue (by having children)."

(2) Pumsavana (Engendering a male issue)

Pumsavana and Simantonayana (the third samskara) are only performed during the woman's first issue. Pumsavana is performed in the third or fourth month of pregnancy when the moon is in a male constellation, particularly the Tishya-nakshatra. This symbolises a male child.

Therefore the term pumsavana literally means 'male procreation'. Sushrut, the ancient rishi of Ayurveda, has described the procedure in his Sushruta Samhita: "Having pounded milk with any of these herbs - Sulakshmana, Batasurga, Sahadevi and Vishwadeva - one should instil three or four drops of juice in the right nostril of the pregnant woman. She should not spit out the juice."

(3) Simantonayana (Hair-parting)

In Gujarati this is known as Khodo bharavo. In this, the husband parts the wife's hair. The religious significance of this samskara is to bring prosperity to the mother and long life to the unborn child. It also wards off evil influence. The physiological significance is interesting and advanced. Sushrut (Sharirsthan, Ch.33) believed that the foetus's mind formed in the fifth month of pregnancy. Hence the mother is required to take the utmost care for delivering a healthy child. Stipulating the details, Sushrut enjoined the pregnant mother to avoid exertion of all kinds: refrain from sleeping during the day and keeping awake at night, and also avoid fear, purgatives, phlebotomy (blood letting by slicing veins) and postponing natural excretions. (Sharirsthan Ch.21).

Besides samskaras which affect the physical health of the foetus, ancient scriptures contain examples of learning samskaras imprinted on it. From the Mahabharat, we know that Arjun's son, Abhimanyu, learnt the secrets of battle strategy while in his mother's, Subhadra's, womb. The child-devotee Prahlad of the Shrimad Bhagvatam, learnt about the glory of Lord Narayan while in his mother's, Kayadhu's, womb. Just as a foetus can grasp good spiritual samskaras from the external world, the opposite is also true. It can definitely be affected by certain undesirable habits of the mother. Today we know that smoking, alcohol, certain medications and drugs have a detrimental effect on the foetus. The Varaha Smruti prohibits eating meat during pregnancy. Therefore, the Smrutis enjoined the husband to take every possible care to preserve the physical, mental and spiritual health of his pregnant wife. The Kalavidhan prohibits him from going abroad or to war, from building a new house and bathing in the sea.

Childhood Samskaras

(4) Jatakarma (Birth rituals)

These rituals are performed at the birth of the child. It is believed that the moon has a special effect on the newly born. In addition, the constellation of the planets - nakshatras - also determine the degree of auspiciousness. If birth occurs during an inauspicious arrangement, the jatakarmas are performed to ward off their detrimental effects on the child. The father would also request the Brahmanishtha Satpurush for blessings.

(5) Namkaran (Name-giving)

Based on the arrangement of the constellations at birth, the child is named on a day fixed by caste tradition.

In the Hindu Dharma, the child is frequently named after an avatar, deity, sacred place or river, saint, etc., as a constant reminder of the sacred values for which that name represents.

(6) Nishkrama (First outing)

In the third month the child is allowed agni (fire) and chandra (moon) darshan.

In the fourth month he is taken out of the house for the first time, by the father or maternal uncle, to the mandir for the Lord's darshan.

(7) Annaprashan (First feeding)

Feeding the child with solid food is the next important samskara. For a son this is done in even months - the 6th, 8th, 10th or 12th months. For a daughter this is done in odd months - 5th, 7th or 9th months. The food offered is cooked rice with ghee. Some sutras advocate honey to be mixed with this.

By advocating this samskara, the wise sages accomplished two important considerations. First, the child is weaned away from the mother at a proper time. Second, it warns the mother to stop breast feeding the child. For, an uninformed mother, many out of love, continue breast feeding the child, without realising that she was not doing much good to herself or the child.

(8) Chudakarma (Chaul) (Shaving of head)

This samskara involves shaving the head (of a son) in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 5th year, or when initiating him with the janoi (Upanayan). According to Sushrut, the significance of this, together with nail cutting, is to give delight, lightness, prosperity, courage and happiness (Chikitsasthan. Ch. 24-72). Charak also voiced a similar opinion.

A tuft of hair (shikha, chotli) is left in place at the top of the head for longevity. Sushrut points out its significance, "Inside the head, near the top, is the joint of a shira (artery) and a sandhi (critical juncture). There, in the eddy of hairs, is a vital spot called the adhipati (overlord). Any

injury to this part causes sudden death" (Sharirsthan Ch. VI, 83). In the course of time, the shikha was regarded as a symbol of the Hindu Dharma and its removal came to be regarded as a grave sin (Laghu Harita IV).

(9) Karnavedh (Piercing the earlobes)

The child's ear lobes are pierced either on the 12th or 16th day; or 6th, 7th or 8th month; or 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th or 9th year. Sushrut reasoned, "The ears of a child should be pierced for protection (from diseases such as hydrocoele and hernia) and decoration (Sharirasthan Ch.16.1,

Chikitsasthan Ch.19.21). One sutra says that a goldsmith should pierce the ears while Sushrut advocates a surgeon. For a boy, the right earlobe is pierced first and for a girl, the left. For boys today, this samskara is only prevalent in some states of India. In girls, this samskara has lost its religious significance and is only performed to enable them to wear earrings.

Educational Samskaras

(10) Vidyarambh (Learning the alphabet)

This samskara is also known as Akshararambha, Aksharlekhan, Aksharavikaran and Aksharavishkaran.

It is performed at the age of five and is necessary before commencing Vedic study - Vedarambh.

After bathing, the child sits facing west, while the acharya (teacher) sits facing east. Saffron and rice are scattered on a silver plank. With a gold or silver pen the child is made to write letters on the rice. The following phrases are written: "Salutation to Ganesh, salutation to Sarasvati (goddess of knowledge), salutation to family deities and salutation to Narayan and Lakshmi." The child then writes, "Aum Namah Siddham". He then presents gifts to the acharya, such as a pagh and safo (head adornment of cloth). The acharya then blesses the child.

(11) Upanayan (Yagnopavit) (Sacred thread initiation)

At the age of eight the son is initiated by the acharya with the sacred thread, known as janoi or yagnopavit. Amongst all the foregoing samskaras this is regarded as supreme. It is the dawn of a new life, hence dvija - twice born. The child enters studentship and a life of perfect discipline which involves brahmacharya (celibacy). He leaves the guardianship of his parents to be looked after by the acharya. This samskara is performed by Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, for both boys and girls. Therefore, both the boy and girl received training in discipline, truthful living and physical service. During the course of time this samskara ceased to be given to girls, who thus failed to be formally educated. Today, the tradition of education underlying this samskara has died out. Upanayan only functions to bestow dvijatva to the son.

Upa means 'near.' Nayan means 'to take (him) to,' i.e. to take the son to the teacher.

Like the parents, the acharya will mold the student with love and patience into a man of character. He will inculcate in him the invaluable knowledge of the Vedas. This is the second meaning of Upanayan. Among all the cultural systems of the world, none have advocated such a lofty and stringent ideal for studentship than this Hindu samskara. If a student sincerely observes this samskara, he will turn into a successful scholar. Added to this, during this period, he receives from the acharya, a strong background for the householder's life he will later enter. Today, it is obviously not feasible to stay at the acharya's house. But the next best equivalent is to enter a chhatralay - boarding school. The discipline involved infuses in the student a fortitude generally not possible at home.

Whereas students wear one janoi, householders could wear two; one for himself and one for his wife.

The three strings of the janoi denote the three gunas - sattva (reality), rajas (passion), and tamas (darkness). They also remind the wearer that he has to pay off the three debts he owes to the seers, ancestors and gods. The three strings are tied by a knot known as the brahmagranthi which symbolises Brahma (creator), Vishnu (sustainer) and Shiva (leveller). One important significance of wearing the janoi is that the wearer would be constantly aware of the different deities which the threads represented. Therefore, he would be vigilant prior to any action not in accordance with the Dharma Shastras.

(12) Vedarambh (Beginning Vedic study)

This samskara was not mentioned in the earliest lists of the Dharma Sutras, which instead listed the four Vedic vows - Ved Vrats. It seemed that though upanayan marked the beginning of education, it did not coincide with Vedic study. Therefore a separate samskara was felt necessary to initiate Vedic study. In this samskara, each student, according to his lineage, masters his own branch of the Vedas.

(13) Keshant (Godaan) (Shaving the beard)

This samskara is included as one of the four Ved Vrats. When the other three faded, keshant itself became a separate samskara. 'Kesh' means hair and 'ant' means end. This samskara involves the first shaving of the beard by the student at the age of sixteen. It is also called Godaan because it involves gifting a cow to the acharya and gifts to the barber. Since the student now enters manhood he is required to be more vigilant over his impulses of youth. To remind him of his vow of brahmacharya, he is required to take the vow anew; to live in strict continence and austere discipline for one year.

(14) Samavartan (End of Studentship)

This samskara is performed at the end of the brahmacharya phase - the end of studentship. 'Sama vartan' meant 'returning home from the house of the acharya.' This involves a ritual sacrificial bath known as Awabhruth Snan. It is sacrificial because it marks the end of the long observance of brahmacharya. It is a ritual bath because it symbolises the crossing of the ocean of learning by the student - hence Vidyasnaatak - one who has crossed the ocean of learning. In Sanskrit literature, learning is compared to an ocean.

Before the bath, the student has to obtain permission from the acharya to end his studentship and give him guru-dakshina - tuition fees. Permission is necessary because it certifies the student as a person fit in learning, habit and character for a married life. Obviously the student is not in a position to pay fees. One Sutra describes the debt of the teacher as unpayable, "Even the earth containing the seven continents is not sufficient for the guru-dakshina." But the formality is a required courtesy and the acharya says, "My child, enough with money. I am satisfied with thy merits." He would elaborate with the impressive statements, known as Dikshant Pravachan, noted in the Taittiriya Upanishad (I.11).

Those students who wished to remain as lifelong students observing brahmacharya would remain with the acharya. Today, this means accepting a spiritual guru - an Ekantik Satpurush and becoming a sadhu. The student thus bypasses the next two ashrams, to enter sannyas.

Marriage

(15) Vivaha

This is the most important of all the Hindu Samskaras. The Smrutis laud the gruhastha (householder) ashram as the highest, for it is the central support of the other three ashrams. Manu enjoins, "Having spent the first quarter of one's life in the guru's house, the second quarter in one's own house with the wife, and the third quarter in the forest, one should take sannyas in the fourth, casting away every worldly tie." (Manu Smruti IV.1). By marriage an individual is able to achieve the four purusharths (endeavors) of life: dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kama (desire) and moksha (salvation). He is also able to pay off ancestral debt by having children. Procreation for children is also a primary purpose of marriage. In addition to being a religious sacrament, Hindu marriage is also regarded as an important social institution. For developing a stable and ideal society, marriage has been regarded as an essential element in all cultures of the world. A society without loyal marital ties tends to degrade. It is said that promiscuity was one reason for the downfall of the Romans. By marriage, both an individual and society, while remaining within the moral norms, can progress together. Simultaneously it does not cause harm to others nor infringe upon one's independence. This samskara boosts cultural values and dharma. It upholds and promotes moral righteousness and self control.

The Hindu Marriage - Beliefs And Sentiments

The Hindu marriage system is described as a religious and social institution. More important is that it is a union of two spirits rather than just two individuals. To consider this metaphysically, an individual is made up of three bodies: physical - composed of matter (sthul), subtle - composed of mind (sukshma) and causal - composed of the jiva (karan). The Vedic marriage is a union between all the three - matter with matter, mind with mind and jiva with jiva. With its sacramental vows, the couple embark on a journey together to attain the four objectives (purusharths) of life.

During this journey the couple satisfy their desires - to earn, to beget children, and to serve society. Added to this, they follow the path of bhakti (devotion) and discover the divinity within themselves, of Brahman and Parabrahman. This is reflected in one of the rites during the ceremony. Mantras are chanted to invoke Narayan in the bridegroom and Lakshmi in the bride. The parents, relatives and everyone present then bow to them. The union is between god and goddess, not two material bodies. The underlying injunction to the couple is, "You are not the body, but atma."

Regarding each other as the atma is the fundamental basis of a Vedic marriage. It is unique in all the world's cultures - which primarily observe the Gandharva system based on passion. This understanding is all the more important in marital discord.

At the root of any marital discord lies intolerance due to body consciousness and one's ego - the 'I' and 'mine'. If the couple is united by atma for a common, ultimate goal, moksha, then 'I' and 'you' cease to exist. This is because 'I' and 'you' are empirically atma. And when 'I' and 'you' are believed to be atma, where is the conflict that would otherwise arise from selfish motives and desires? Therefore, in a Hindu marriage when conflicts and differences arise, they can be easily resolved. The couple consider each other as the atma, for the atma is pure, genderless, ageless, and inherently divine. Vivaha itself means 'to lift, to support, to uphold, to sustain'.

Admittedly, both spouses have to make sacrifices and efforts to imbibe this lofty philosophy. It is not an overnight process, more a lifelong, sacred commitment. It is this philosophy which has made the Vedic marriage a grand success for thousands of years. Only the recent rise in materialism, primarily based on superficial and mundane factors and body consciousness, have begun to ruin today's Hindu marriages.

The aforementioned sentiments, and a few others, are symbolically depicted and verbally emphasized by mantras chanted during the actual marriage ceremony, whose steps we consider next.

The Marriage Ceremony

(i) Haridralepan

On the day before the marriage, a creamy paste of turmeric and oil is smeared over the bride's body. This is known as pithi cholvi in Gujarati and haridralepan in Sanskrit. The symbolic sentiment is that if the bride is of a dark complexion, this cosmetic treatment will endow her a lighter hue.

Prior to the marriage ceremony, Ganapati (Ganesh) is worshipped at the bride's home as an auspicious beginning of the rituals, since Ganapati is the deity of auspiciousness.

(ii) Var Prekshan (Welcoming the bridegroom)

The bridegroom is welcomed at the entrance of the bride's house or marriage hall. The bride and the bridegroom place garlands over each other under the marriage canopy (mandap). A vow is then recited, "In following my duty, in our financial matters, in fulfilling my physical thirst, I will always consult you, take your consent and act upon it." This is known as the Pratijna Svikaar.

(iii) Madhu Parka (Offering honey)

The bride welcomes the bridegroom and gives him honey, yoghurt and ghee (clarified butter), suggesting that she will always please him with the sweetness of her behavior. There is also a sour tinge to the mixture, which symbolises the bitterness that life can sometimes bring.

(iv) Pani Grahan (Proffering of the bride's hand)

The parents of the bride proffer her hand to the bridegroom and request him to accept their daughter as his wife. The bridegroom accepts the bride as his wife and presents her with clothing and jewellery.

(v) Vaivahik Homa (Invoking the sacred fire)

The sacred fire is invoked and offerings are poured into it. Agni (fire) represents the mouth of Lord Vishnu and symbolises illumination of the mind, knowledge and happiness and Lord Vishnu serves as a divine witness.

(vi) Shilarohan (Stepping on the stone)

The bride places her right foot on a stone. The bridegroom tells her to be as firm as the stone in his house so that they are able to face problems with ease.

(vii) Laja Homa (Offering parched rice into sacred fire)

Four offerings are made to the sacred fire. The brother of the bride places parched rice into the bride's hands, half of which is meant to fall into the bridegroom's hands. Mantras are chanted.

The bride prays to Yama, the God of Death, that he grants long life, health, happiness and prosperity to the bridegroom.

(viii) Saptapadi (The seven steps)

The bride and the bridegroom take seven steps around the sacred fire. At each step they invoke the blessings of God. As the couple walk the seven steps they pledge the following seven vows:

1. Let us take this first step towards food and the necessities of life.
2. Let us take this second step towards strength and vigor.
3. Let us take this third step towards wealth and prosperity.
4. Let us take this fourth step towards obtaining happiness around the household.
5. Let us take this fifth step for progeny.
6. Let us take this sixth step to act according to the six seasons and time.
7. Let us take this seventh step to believe in the same religion and lifelong friendship.

(ix) Agni Parikrama (Circumambulation of sacred fire)

The bride and the bridegroom move around the sacred fire four times. On the first three rounds the bride leads the bridegroom and on the fourth the bridegroom leads the bride. Before each round an offering is made. This part of the ceremony is known as the mangal phera in Gujarati.

(x) Saubhagya Chinha (Blessing the bride)

The bridegroom blesses the bride by putting kumkum (vermillion powder) or sindur at the parting of her hair or on her forehead and by giving her a mangalsutra (sacred necklace).

(xi) Surya Darshan (Looking at the sun)

The bridegroom accepts the bride as his wife in the presence of the sun deity. If the marriage is performed at night, he tells her to look at the Dhruva star (star of steadfastness) and at the star of Arundhati (star of devotion). The bridegroom tells her to be firm in her love and duty, and to be devoted to him like Arundhati was to Sage Vashishtha. The bride tells the bridegroom that she will follow their example and remain devoted.

(xii) Hruday Sparsh (Touching of hearts)

The bridegroom and bride touch each other's hearts. The bride tells the bridegroom, "I touch thy heart unto mine. God has given thee as my husband. May thy heart be mine now. When I talk to thee, please listen to me with perfect attention." The bridegroom repeats the vow to the bride.

(xiii) Annaprashan (Feeding the bridegroom)

The bride feeds the bridegroom and tells him, "By feeding you this sweet food (traditionally kansar - made of wheat flour, sugar and ghee) I shall bind thy heart with the thread of truth and sincerity and love. My heart will be thine and thy heart will be mine forever."

(xiv) Purnahuti (Completion of ceremony)

After the final offering is made to the sacred fire, the priest blesses the bride and bridegroom. Flower petals and rice are distributed to the guests, who shower the bride and the bridegroom. With their blessings the marriage ceremony is completed. The bride and the bridegroom are no longer separate entities but an integrated personality who will share their lives in every way.

(16) Antyesthi (Death rites)

The rishis and Dharma Sutras were at a consensus regarding the final goal of life, which they enjoined in the four ashrams - stages of life. The stalwart poet Kalidas in his classic, Raghuvansha (1-8) stipulates:

"Shaishave abhyastavidyānām yauvane vishayaishinām;
Vārdhake munivruttinām yogenānte tanutyajām."

"One studies during childhood (brahmacharya ashram), fulfills his desires during youth (gruhastha ashram), renounces worldly activity for silent contemplation during old age (vanprastha ashram) and then endeavors for God-realisation, after which he leaves his body." Antyesthi is the final samskara in a Hindu's life. Yajur Veda regards vivaha as the sixteenth samskara while Rig Veda considers antyesthi. Though performed after the death of a person by his relatives, it is of importance because the value of the next world is higher than that of the present.

The final rituals are performed with meticulous care with the help of Brahmin priests. The first ritual after death is to place a few tulsi leaves and a few drops of water in the mouth of the dead person. It is then laid on the floor which has been purified by applying the sacred cow dung.

The old clothes are removed and the body is bathed with sanctified water. The body is then covered with one piece of a new, unbleached, uncut cloth (kafan). It is then laid on a bier (nanami) made of bamboo canes tied with jute strings.

The underlying message in removing the old clothes can be gleaned from a Sanskrit verse:
"Dhanāni bhumau pashavashcha goshthe,

Nāri gruhadware sakhā smashāne,
Dehashchitāyām paraloka mārge,
Dharmānugo gachhati jiva ekaha."

"Wealth will remain buried, cattle will remain in the pen, (his) wife will accompany (him) to the doorway, friends will accompany him to the crematorium, the body will come till the funeral pyre, but on the path to the next world, the jiva goes alone (with his karmas)."

This rite infuses spiritual strength and thus considerably offsets the grief and hurt suffered by the relatives of the deceased.

The family members then take the body to the cremation pyre, all the while chanting the Lord's name. 'Ram bolo bhai Ram' is the most commonly uttered phrase. In Bengal it is 'Hari bol, Hari bol.' After the body is laid on the funeral pyre, ghee is poured over it and the fire kindled by the nearest relative. Sesame seeds are also sprinkled onto the fire as a form of puja.

The latter two steps are obviously not possible where an electric kiln is used for cremation. The fire lighted in the vivaha ceremony was later, by tradition, taken to the house and kept kindled in an altar throughout life. This signified that married life was to be lived through life's vicissitudes, together. When one of the spouse died, the agni (fire) was taken in a crucible or pot to the crematorium, where it was used to light the pyre. This symbolized the end of vivaha and the beginning of agni (antyeshti) samskara.

The rituals and observances which then follow vary in different groups and parts of Gujarat. By cremation, the body's five basic components - known as panch bhuts - prithvi (earth), jal (water), tej (fire), vayu (wind) and akash (space) are returned to those of the universe, thus maintaining the cosmic equilibrium. All the samskaras are spiritually oriented. However, some directly benefit the environment in one way or another.

Scientists in the past decade have begun to realize this. They have pointed out that cremation, for example, is the best, most effective and environmentally prudent method for disposing of the dead. Burial leads to enormous problems of space and groundwater contamination. Corpses infected with plague and slow virus diseases infect vectors which directly feed on them. This ultimately affects humans. Recently in England, the wisdom of cremating even diseased cattle has been realized, especially those afflicted with mad cow disease.

Asthi Sanchayan

After cremation, the ashes and residual bones (asthi) are collected in an urn. In some communities it is customary to wash them with milk and sanctified water. The urn is then taken to a sacred river such as Ganga, Narmada or to the sacred confluence of the three rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati in Allahabad, known as the Triveni Sangam.

Sutak (Ashauch) - Impurity

This is a period of ten to thirteen days during which the nearest family members do not perform their personal daily religious rituals such as puja, arti and thal. Their personal puja is given to a friend to perform on their behalf. The family members can visit the mandir for darshan. During this period, religious scriptures and devotional songs are recited and sung respectively, for the attainment of Akshardham by the deceased.

On either the eleventh, twelfth or thirteenth day, the relatives offer thal (food) to the Lord in the local mandir to repay pitru (ancestral) debt.

The general Hindu belief is that as soon as the soul leaves the body, it adopts another body whose limbs grow day by day. On the tenth day after death this 'interim' body grows completely. The son of the deceased offers the pindas - food balls made from wheat flour and water - to the growing limbs, either day-to-day or all ten together on the tenth day. It is believed that, upto this day, the deceased still continues his relation with this world.

Therefore the deceased is termed preta, which means one who has departed, but who has not yet reached the other world.

On the eleventh day, Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra and Yama are invoked, with Vishnu as the special witness. In their presence the deceased is offered pindas. On the twelfth day the departed soul is given away to the other world, where he then resides with his forefathers. As soon as he reaches the other world he is released from his preta body.

The relatives are then freed from the sutak and can then perform their daily puja.

These rites are also samskaras on the soul to lead it to God.

An associated rite after cremation, generally practiced in India, is for one or more male members of the deceased to shave their heads. Some communities eat only simple foods for a fixed number of days.

Sajjaa

In Gujarat the family members then perform the sajjaa ritual. In this, they offer a cow, a cot, utensils, food grains, a set of clothes and footwear and anything else that the deceased used to a Brahmin. The Brahmin performs a ritual and takes the objects, symbolically to send them to the deceased for his use in the next world.

But if it is a family or caste tradition to perform the sajjaa, this can be done at the nearest mandir and the objects are offered to the Lord Himself.

Another alternative which is becoming popular is the jivitkriya. It is the same as the sajjaa, except it is performed by a person while alive - as the name implies. " The jivitkriya imbues a feeling of contentment in the individual since he/she witnesses it.

Conclusion

In the past the sixteen Hindu samskaras formed an integral part of Hindu life. Today, with the encroachment of modern living, especially in urban India, only a few of them have survived: chaul, upanayan, vivaha and antyeshti. Yet these samskaras, with their spiritual import, holistically 'samskarize' (edify) all aspects of an individual's life. Since each samskara ritual makes the individual the focus of the occasion, he/she is psychologically boosted.

This strengthens the individual's self-esteem and enriches interaction with those around. The samskaras bring together family members, close relatives and friends, hence increase the cohesiveness of the family unit. Therein the unit harmonizes and strengthens the social structure. The consequence of this is a healthy society with a strong cultural identity which easily refines, boosts and perpetuates its traditional beliefs, customs, morals and values. This has been one of the key reasons for the Hindu Dharma withstanding the rigors and onslaughts of foreign incursions and upheavals through the ages.

The ancient rishis and sages enjoined the sixteen samskaras for the eternal benefit of mankind through their direct experience with the Divine. They wove them into the fabric of daily life of the Hindu. They are 'outward acts,' from pre-birth to post-death, for inward or spiritual grace. Today, the key samskara which will determine the cohesion and perpetuation of Hindu traditions anywhere in the world is vivaha, if observed sincerely with its pristine and lofty sentiments.