Om, Sri gurubhyo namaha

Vaidika Samskaras

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1. Introduction
Over the ages, humankind has always strived to reach perfection and to explore the ultimate Truth. In this quest, every religion has some unique features. Some of the unique features characteristic of the Hindu Faith or sanAtana dharma are:

· The concept of God as the very creation itself. For example we come across passages like,

    भूःऽच्चदृ यस्य नामिः।
    त्रिभुवनवपुर्ण विष्णुमीशं नामामि।
    and
    आपाताः-नभः स्थलात्भुवन-ब्रह्माण्डः
    आविष्कृतः।

in the dhyAna slokas of Vishnu Sahasranamam and Sri Rudram respectively.

· One’s birth according to one’s karma. The entire chapter of karma yoga in Bhagavad Gita deals with this aspect in great detail.

· The idea of liberation, mukti, even when one is alive - jeevanmuktii: For example, we have in the in Bhagavad Gita:

    पशयन् श्रवणन स्मृतिः जिज्ञसन् असन् गच्छन्
    स्वपन्त्वशनन आसनेव आसनना तुष्टा।

· The manifestation of the Divine through innumerable avatArs - ten of them are more popular; Bhagavatam mentions 21 avatars, but says that they are countless! अवतारः असंख्यः।

· varNArsama dharma - The Lord says, चतुर्वर्ष्यम्
    मण्डल सृष्ट्यम् in the Gita.

All these features are found in various texts and derive their basis from the Vedas. However, these are not given in a clear and concise format in the Vedas. For the Vedic teachings to be useful to humankind, our Rishis, through their inquiry, extracted the vedic wisdom, like extracting a precious metal from the ore! Consequently, a new family of literature known as Sootras (cryptic statements) - emerged, such as, the Strouta sutras, grihya sootras, dharma sootras etc. Since the sootras themselves were abstract, commentaries on these sootras were given by Rishis in the form of smritis, such as, YAjnavalkhya smrīti, ParAsara smrīti, etc. The term smrīti refers to a ‘remembered idea’ (from the vedas). Later, itihAsas (RaAmAyanNa and MahAbhArata) and purANAs (BhAgavatam SkAndam etc.) were written in the form of personified stories, to make these concepts understandable to common people.

2. Inner Virtues {Atma Guna’s}

The scriptures have expounded the Truth in absolute terms in all the Upanishads. The Hindu Faith aims at enabling every human being to the realization of this Absolute Truth or the Self, and proclaims that, this realization is the only goal for every one to reach. The scriptures say that this realization could be achieved through the development of Atma GuNa’s, or certain inner virtues. Eight virtues have been mentioned in particular, and they are:

1. Compassion {dayA}, consideration and sensitivity for all.
2. Patience or forbearance or the ability to face provoking situations without agitation {kshamA or kshAnti}.
3. Free of jealousy {anasooyA}.
4. Purity - internal and external {Soucam}.
5. Keeping cool, free from burden {anAyAsam}.
6. Not being miserly (akArpaNyam).
7. Absence of desire, attachment (aspruH)
8. Auspiciousness, peace (mangalam, Ananda).

When an individual acquires these qualities, he/she becomes eligible to Atma JnAnam, and through inquiry, the person realizes the Absolute.

3. Vedic Rituals (vaidika samskAra's)

The scriptures proclaim that a total person should be harmonious in thought (maanasam), word (vAcika), and deed (bodily actions - kAyikam). As can be seen, this virtue is far from realization by the vast majority of people, and so has to be evolved right from birth! Instead of just listing the above mentioned Atma GuNa’s and postulating them as a requirement in the building up of a total person for gaining the eligibility to the inquiry of the Self, our scriptures provide us with a manual as to how to acquire these qualities throughout one’s life, through the performance of rituals known as vaidika samskAra’s, starting from the conception of the child, until death! In addition to some of the unique characteristics of the Hindu Faith mentioned earlier, vaidika samskAra is another unique and important feature since it helps the individual to develop into a total person, physically and spiritually.

3.1 The word samskAra

The seed for the samskAra’s is the Vedas, and, the word samskAra, the mantras and the arrangement are given in the grihya sootra’s. [For an overview of our vedic scriptures please refer to Vol. 1 No. 1 of Paramaartha Tatttvam.] In the vedas, the process of purification is denoted by the term samskuryAt. If any object is to be offered to the Lord, that object has to be purified first, both at the physical level and at the spiritual (subtle) level. After such purification, a new quality is believed to be born in the object, which then becomes eligible to be offered to the Lord.

जिविक्रियाज्ञ: अतिशय विशेष: ।

(Vedic rites, when formed, certain special qualities are born)

All through, the vedas teach that the ultimate goal of life is liberation (moksha:) and if one has to achieve this goal, one has to become qualified (yogyah:). This eligibility comes by offering oneself to the Lord (Atma samarpaNam) and before such offering, the individual has to go through -almost a life-long - purification process. The entire life-style is designed to be a process of samskAra, and in this life-style, every stage is indicated by a particular ritual. All these rituals are given in the scriptures. It can be interpreted then, that, those special qualities, which are born by performing certain vedic rituals that make one fit for the True Knowledge of liberation, are samskAra’s. In course of time, the rituals themselves, which led to these special qualities, came to be known as samskAra’s.

So, two meanings are primarily given for samskAra’s

a) characteristic/special quality - atiSaya viŚesha: and
b) the very ritual or ceremony.

In addition, a third definition also is given to the word, which means, mental impression or vAsana. The Rishis acknowledged the fact that a person’s mind can be influenced by so many factors all through the life based on one’s own actions and through actions of others. The samskaras are supposed to accomplish two things to an individual:

दोष अपनयनेन वा गुणाधानेन वा ।

1) दोष अपनयनेन dosha apnayanam - elimination of physical and mental impurities (dosha) and
2) गुणाधानेन guNAdhAnam - adding special virtues or Atma guNa’s. As mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita (13-7):
It is interesting to note that, even though the *samskAra* were meant to purify an individual to become eligible for *moksha*, the Rishis have formulated them in such a manner that the individual also attains other benefits - *dharma*, *artha* and *kAMA*.

They involve the purification of the total personality - *mAnasam*, *vaCikam* and *kAyikam* - since one is likely to have sinned through all these three instruments!

*Samskaras* contribute to the overall growth of the individual, such as:

a) The physical discipline during and after the ritual - for example, *prANAyAm* helps to regulate the blood circulation, etc. Also, several do's and don'ts are prescribed for the *brahmaCari* such as:

- *ajanavAdaSlla*: अजनवदशोलः - no gossip;
- *adhivA svApI*: अधिवस्पितः मा स्पितः - no sleeping during day time;
- *srtilbih*: यवस्थांत्र वस्त्रस्य - अवृत्तरं सच्चारी - speak only what is required to ladies, etc.

(More details will be seen during the discussion on *upanayanam* later).

b) The mental growth - again, *prANAyAm* helps to sharpen the mind; improves *medha* *Sakti*; for example, prayers such as,

> *SriddhAm medhAm yaSa: praJnAm Sriyam Ayushyam teja Arogyham dehime havyavAhana*

Also, *sriddhAvAn labhate jnAnam* etc.

c) Imparting of values, ethics and morality - for example: *kAmo kArshIt manyuh kArishIt - japa* to overcome greed and anger.

d) Creation of awareness of the stage of life - after *upanayanam*, *brahmacarya ASrama*; after *vivAhAm*, *grihasta ASrama*. Development of sanctity for life itself.

e) Sensitivity to elements of nature - for example, all divinities are water - सर्व्व देवताः आपम्; similarly fire is Divinity and so on.

f) The respect that the entire creation is something to be worshipped - is *brahman - sarvam brahma mayam jagat*.

g) The awareness that the individual is part of Nature and not separate from it.

h) The concept of social / family life - all rituals involve relatives, friends etc.

So, the *vaidika samskaras* have been designed by the Rishis to contribute to the overall growth of the individual.

### 3.2 How many *samskaras* are given in the scriptures?

As was mentioned earlier, the *sootra*'s give a comprehensive account of various *samskAra* and, among the *sootra*’s, the *grihya sootra*’s give the most elaborate account. The *grihya sootra*’s themselves are many, which deal with all aspects of domestic life like marriage, etc. Since these *samskAra*’s are basically derived from the *vedas*, various numbers are given in these *grihya sootra*’s. Most popularly, forty one *samskAra*’s are enumerated, which we can broadly classify in to nine groups. We will discuss in detail, each of the forty one *samskaras* - starting from conception of the baby, till the final cremation - in subsequent issues of Paramaarththa Tattvam.

Source Material:


3. Lectures by Swami Paramarthananda, Madras.