

# 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,

भूःपादौ यस्य नाभिः ।  
त्रिभुवनवपुषं विष्णुमीशं नमामि ।  
and

आपाताळ-नभः स्थलान्त-भुवन-ब्रह्माण्डं  
आविस्फुरत् ।

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 - *jeevanmukti*. For example, we have in the in *Bhagavad Gita*:

पश्यन् शृण्वन् स्पृशन् जिघ्रन् अश्नन् गच्छन्  
स्वपन् श्वशन् आत्मनेव आत्मना तुष्टा ।

- The manifestation of the Divine through innumerable *avatAras* - ten of them are more popular; *Bhagavatam* mentions 21 avatars, but says that they are countless ! अवताराः असंख्येयः ।
- *varNASrama dharma* - The Lord says, चतुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टम् 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 smriti*, *ParAsara smriti*, etc. The term *smriti* 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 (*aspruhA*)
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 (*maanasa*), 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 Tattvam.) 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.

विधिक्रियाजन्यः अतिशय विशेषः ।

(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 (*yogya:*). 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 viSesha:* 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 गुणाधनेन वा ।

- 1) दोष अपनयनम् *dosha apnayanam* - elimination of physical and mental impurities (*dosha*) and
- 2) गुणाधानम् *guNAdhAnam* - adding special virtues or *Atma guNa's*. As mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita* (13-7):

अमानित्वमदम्भित्वमहिंसा क्षान्तिरार्जवम् ।  
आचार्योपासनं शौचं स्थैर्यमात्मविनिग्रहः ॥

(humility, unpretentiousness, non-violence, patience, uprightness, service to the teacher, purity, steadiness and self-control)

It is interesting to note that, even though the *samskAras* 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, *prANAyAmam* helps to regulate the blood circulation, etc. Also, several do's and don'ts are prescribed for the *brahmacAri* such as:

*ajanavAdaSila*: अजनवादशीलः - no gossip;

*adhivA svApI* अधिवा स्वापी / मा सुषुप्त्वा - no sleeping during day time;

*strIbhi*: *yAvatharta sambhAshI* स्त्रीभिः यावथर्त संभाषी - speak only what is required to ladies, etc.

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

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

*SraddhAm medhAm yaSa*: *prajnAm Sriyam*  
*Ayushyam teja Arogyam dehime*  
*havyavAhana* ।

Also, *sraddhAvAn 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 - सर्वा देवता आपः ; 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's* 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 Paramartha Tattvam.

Source Material:

1.Hindu Samskaras, Rajbali Pandey, Motilal Benarasidas,Delhi, 1998.

2. The Book of Samskaras, Prema Rasa Dasa, Bhakti Vedanta Book Trust International, 1977.

3. Lectures by Swami Paramarthananda, Madras.