

## Pregnancy and Samskara

Pregnancy in the Hindu tradition is a very important time for a woman, especially if it is her first pregnancy, which it is hoped will take place as soon after marriage as possible. A new bride goes to live with her husband's family, and in many cases, she has never met them before, so as a newcomer to the household, she has a low status and often feels isolated, homesick and awkward socially and sexually. Pregnancy helps welcome the wife into the husband's family, and she is made to feel comfortable; eating well, resting often and being relieved of certain tiresome tasks (see Kakar 26 – 27).

Before conception, during pregnancy and following birth, there are many Samskara performed in the Hindu tradition. "Samskara" is a term generally translated as "rite of passage", but it can also mean, "to perfect, refine, polish, prepare, educate, cultivate and train" (McGee 333). The Samskara performed around and during pregnancy have different purposes, but all are to aid in a healthy, auspicious pregnancy (preferably that of a son). These Samskaras are prescribed in the Grhya Sutras (ancient Hindu texts of householder rites) and are also in current ritual handbooks, even though they are not used very often anymore. The first three Samskaras I will be discussing take place from before conception to birth, and the last two take place within two weeks of the birth.

The first Samskara that is involved in pregnancy is called the Garbhadhana, also known as the *niseka* (see McGee 339) and relates to conception. Garbhadhana is sometimes thought to be the Garbha Samskara (the Samskara of the embryo) but is generally assumed to be the Ksetra Samskara (the consecration of the wife) (see Tachikawa et. al. 101). In the present day, this Samskara is not performed as a separate ritual but is usually absorbed into the wedding rituals (see McGee 341).

The Garbhadhana is also called the rite of insemination (see McGee 335) and it involves the husband's seed being placed into the wife's womb in order to secure the production of offspring. The Garbhadhana should be performed immediately after wedding, but one may also wait until the fourth day after the beginning of the first menstruation after the wedding. This latter time is thought to be when the wife's womb is ripe for the planting of the husband's seed. This ritual should be performed on a day that is considered auspicious (see McGee 340).

If a male child is preferred, which is often the case as a son is expected to perform his father's funeral rites, an even numbered lunar day is considered auspicious. A full moon or new moon are considered inauspicious, as is performing Garbhadhana under Mula or Magha (see McGee 340) which are lunar mansions, or the moon one is born under (see Kapoor 215 & 238). When the night has been chosen, the husband asks his wife to accompany him and recites nine specific Mantras that accompany the husband's different actions during the act (see Tachikawa et. al. 101). When "a learned daughter who will live out her full life span" is desired, the wife is supposed to cook rice with sesame seeds for them both to eat, together with *ghee* (see McGee 340).

Ancient texts assumed that gender was not determined when conception took place, but at about half way through the pregnancy. Therefore another way to ensure the foetus was a boy was to perform Pumsavana, "meant to stimulate, consecrate, and influence the fetus [sic] bringing about a male child" (McGee 340), during the third or fourth month, before the foetus could be felt moving. The day for this Samskara must be auspicious and under a male constellation, and the wife must fast and bathe before the ritual begins (see McGee 340).

Pumsavana ought to be performed in a round apartment with the wife facing east (an auspicious direction). The husband places a grain of barley on the wife's right hand and then

places a mustard seed on either side and pours curds or yogurt on top of them. The wife is to eat this mixture without repeating any Mantras. The wife is then to sip some water and the husband places his hands on her belly and recites a Mantra about his seed entering his wife's womb and a male son being delivered in the tenth month. The husband then pounds shoots or sprouts of a Nyagrodha tree (or for "followers of the Rg Vedic Grhya Sutras, *Durva* or *Asvagandha* 'bent grass'" (Tachikawa et. al. 103)) and mixes the resulting juices with ghee and shoves it up his wife's right nostril while he stands behind her and she sits with her head against his lap (see Tachikawa et. al. 101 – 103 and McGee 340 – 341).

The next Samskara that is performed is Simantonnayana, which is prescribed for the fourth month and is the only Samskara during pregnancy that need only be performed once, as the other Samskara are thought to be performed on the embryo, while the Simantonnayana is thought to be performed on the mother (see McGee 341 and Tachikawa et. al. 103). The Simantonnayana could be performed in order to smooth the progress of labour and delivery or to ensure the foetus develops properly and is safely delivered in the final trimester, and is also thought to remove any pollution of the foetus that may have been a result of the pollution of its parents (see McGee 341 and Rodrigues 141). Either way, it is performed by the husband's symbolic parting of the wife's hair. In this ritual, the wife is to be facing west, while the husband parts her hair, starting at her forehead and moving toward the back of her head using a porcupine's quill that has three white spots on it. As the husband parts his wife's hair, he is to repeat two Mantras and three Vyahrtis (see Tachikawa et. al. 103.) The three Vyahrtis are Bhuh, Bhuvar and Swar, which roughly translate as earth, sky and heaven and are considered a form of Brahma (see Kapoor 420).

The Pumsavana and Simantonnayana are rarely performed today and taking their place is *dohala-jevana*, which takes place in the seventh month of pregnancy. The *dohala-jevana* involves a gathering of women who prepare a feast for the pregnant woman of food that she likes (or craves). They also adorn her with flowers or unripe fruits, sing her songs, shower her with gifts, anoint her, massage her, and generally create a high-spirited atmosphere (see McGee 341 and Tachikawa et. al. 104). This can be seen as similar to a baby shower in North America. In her final trimester, the pregnant woman is to be well taken care of and protected and should avoid inauspicious activities, as should her husband, in the interest of the welfare of the foetus (see McGee 341). She should also temporarily move back in with her mother so that she can become closer to her mother and learn from her so that she may be a good mother also (see Kakar 27).

The day and constellation under which the infant is born is noted for the purposes of *jyotisa* (see Rodrigues 142), which are important for marriage and naming, among other things. Immediately after the infant is born and preferably before the umbilical cord is cut, the Samskara Jatakarman, the birth ceremony, is to be performed. Jatakarman is supposed to give the child intelligence and strength and help him live a long life. Jatakarman is made up of several niceties. There are four preliminaries and then the father places some gold on an axe that has been placed on a stone, and turns them upside down so that the stone is now on the axe. The father then holds the infant over the stone with its head facing east and says two Mantras about his son being strong like the stone, sharp (intelligent) like the axe, and worthy like the gold (see Tachikawa et. al. 104).

The Aupasanagni (household fire) is then taken away, the Sutikagni (birth fire or confinement fire) is brought in, and the father throws rice grains and mustard seeds into the fire

eleven times, repeating eleven Mantras as he does so in order to keep away evil spirits (see Tachikawa et. al. 104). The father then washes his hands and touches the earth giving thanks to it for delivering his child safe and healthy. The father then performs *medhajanana* in order that the infant may gain intelligence and strength. The rite of *medhajanana* involves mixing *ghee* with gold and Darbha grass or honey and placing it on the lips of the infant while reciting three Mantras. The father also performs *Ayusya*, in which he whispers the names into the infant's ear of people who have had long lives in order to ascertain a long life for the child (see McGee 341 and Tachikawa et. al. 104). The father then bathes the infant in lukewarm water while reciting certain Mantras. He then performs the rite of *stanapratidhana*, the giving of the breast, where he places the infant on the mother in order that the baby might breastfeed, while he recites another Mantra. He then praises a pot of water that is placed near the head of the mother and infant to protect them both. *Jatakarman* is rarely, if ever performed nowadays (see McGee 342 and Tachikawa 104).

Although birth is considered an auspicious event, the actual act of giving birth is inauspicious and the naming of the infant, *Namakarana*, is not to take place until after purification rites, which take place on the eleventh day after birth and include ritual bathing and prayers. Therefore, *Namakarana* should take place on the twelfth day (see McGee 342 and Tachikawa 105).

The infant has been bathed and is dressed in new clothes and then the *Namakarana* begins. The father writes 'salutation to lord Ganapati' then the four names of his son on a bronze vessel filled with grains of rice. The first name is called the *kuladevatanama* ('family-deity-name') and is based on the family deity. The second name comes from the deity of the month the infant is born in and is called the *masanama* ('month-name'). The third name is the name

people are to use with him in public and is called the *vyavaharikanama* ('ordinary-affairs-name'). The fourth name is based on the constellation under which the infant was born and is called *naksatranama* ('constellation-name'). The father then gives honour and praise to the *namadevatas*, the deities who are in charge of names and then whispers the names in his son's right ear as the infant sits on his mother's lap. After the names have been whispered in the son's ear, the Brahmins gathered are to make a statement about the names being "established" and address him by his names and bless him (see Tachikawa 105).

The Grhya Sutras and Dharma Sastras advise that boys' names should have an even number of syllables and girls' names should have an odd number. They also suggest that boys' names end in an unvoiced aspiration or a short sound, while girls' names should end in a long vowel such as [i] or [a] and should be easily pronounceable and feminine (see McGee 342 and Rodrigues 142). Naming the infant is thought to release it from sin (see McGee 342).

## **REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING**

Kakar, Sudhir (2001) *The Essential Writings of Sudhir Kakar*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kapoor, Subodh (ed.) (2000) *The Hindus Encyclopaedia of Hinduism: Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Hinduism*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications

McGee, Mary (2004) "Samskara." In *The Hindu World*. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (eds.). New York: Routledge. pp. 332 – 356.

Rodrigues, Hillary (2006) *Hinduism – the eBook*. Journal of Buddhist Ethics Online Books, Limited.

Tachikawa, Musashi, Hino, Shoun, and Deodhar, Lalita (2001) *Puja and Samskara*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited.

### **Related Topics for Further Investigation**

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### **Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic**

<http://www.shyamasundaradasa.com/>

<http://www.sanathanadharma.com/samskaras/>

<http://www.hindunet.com/>

<http://www.commsp.ee.ic.ac.uk/~pancham/articles/the%20sixteen%20samskaras.pdf>

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe29/sbe29018.htm> (keep reading until 25)

**Article written by Jenna Boyd (Spring 2008) who is solely responsible for its content.**