

## Birth Samskaras

Samskaras are sacraments that pertain to the rites of passage in Hinduism. Sacraments are evident in many religious traditions, for example the baptismal rites within the Catholic Church. Sacrament refers to a “religious ceremony or act regarded as outward with a visible sign of inward and spiritual grace” (Pandey 15). As they appear in the Sanskrit language, sacraments are necessary for the successful membership of an individual into their society. Samskaras are important to orthodox Hindus, in that they certify one as a member of the tradition (Rodrigues 131). According to Sanskrit, scriptures such as the Grhya Sutras, the sacraments prepare an individual for the four stages of life, which are student, householder, forest-dweller and renouncer. They form an important section of the “Karma-kanda or action branch since they mark the various occasions of one’s life from conception in the mother’s womb to the cremation of the body at death” (Sankar 4).

The Samskaras are said to be forty in number, beginning with the ceremonies that take place from conception (*garbhadhana*) and ending with the funeral (*antyeshti*) (Sankar 4). However, the following article will describe those pertaining to the birth rites alone. The birth and babyhood of a Brahmin, as prescribed in the Grhya Sutras, present significant transitional points for children as they eventually grow to be independent of their parents’ care. The article will describe prenatal customs common among Indian women that include the *simantonnayana* sacrament, the welcoming of the newborn within the birthing rites (*jatakarman*) and the naming of the child (*namakarana*).

## Prenatal Care and the Simantonnayana Samskara

In the nine months it takes to create a life there are many customs in which Indian women like to partake in order to make the pregnancy a happy and healthy one. In India, pregnant women will often find solace from strenuous work and potential harm within the walls of their family home. Not only may a pregnant women do no housework, “but she must do no sewing, or anything else that binds things together: for instance, she must not close up the outlet of the great grain jar, or replaster the earth” (Stevenson 1). Here she will get ready for the baby’s arrival, by preparing a birth chamber where the child will be welcomed into the world. There is much care taken in preparation of the room. The room, if possible, is separated from the common rooms of the home, with the blinds drawn and the bed carefully aligned. For example, “great care is taken that the bedstead not lie exactly under the great beam that holds the house together, since some Hindus believe that the god of death perches on this” (Stevenson 2). In order to ensure the longevity of the mother and child, evil spirits are warded off with the *simantonnayana* sacrament in which the hair of the wife is parted by her husband.

This sacrament is performed to ensure the physical and spiritual health of the baby by keeping the mother in good morale. In order to keep her content, “she is addressed as full moon and one with beautiful limbs” (Sankar 5). As the husband begins to part the hair of his wife, he ties a small branch of the fig tree around her neck with the words “Rich in sap is this tree; like the tree rich in sap, be thou fruitful” (Sankar 5). Then the following blessings are uttered, “be the mother of heroic sons and be the mother of living sons” (Sankar 5). The *seemantonnayana* samskara and the prenatal precautions that take place prior to birth promote the well being of both mother and child. The child is brought into the world through the delivery and the welcoming ceremonies which include the Jatakarman sacrament.

## Welcoming the newborn: Jatakarman Samskara

Present at the birth is the women's mother and midwife whom delivers the child and offers spiritual and medical remedies to ease the pain. A medical remedy the midwife may turn to may include, "tearing down the cobweb of a spider, which she will roll into a ball, fill with cloves and place in the womb" (Stevenson 3). After the birth the Jatakarman sacraments take place and are usually performed prior to the umbilical cord being severed. The ceremonies include a series of verses to inspire strength, intelligence, and long life. During this Vedic ceremony, the child is given a gold coin to lick, besmeared with honey and clarified butter (Stevenson 6). The father recites words of strength to his newborn child, "Be a stone, be an axe, and be an imperishable god. From each limb of mine you are born, you are born especially from my heart. You are my own self bearing the name 'son'; may you live for a hundred years" (Sankar, 5).

It is important to note here that it is not common practice for the man to be present within the birthing chamber so often this ritual is omitted. However, one custom preceding the birth which continues to be popular is the three day feeding of molasses and water, referred to as *galasodi*. The woman who is in charge of preparing the mixture is evaluated based on her personal characteristics, since it is believed her qualities will be shared with the newborn. Later on in life "if the child turns out badly, its friends reproach it by reminding it of the noble character of the women who gave it its first molasses" (Stevenson 7). Preceding the three day feeding custom, the child is bathed and given to the mother to begin nursing.

As the child is welcomed into the world the precise date and time are carefully noted in order to foretell the child's life path. Astrology plays a key role in deciding auspiciousness, that

is, the fortitude of the child's future endeavours. For example, a proverb claims "that a girl born on a Wednesday will result in her father or brother dying or suffering loss within a year (she is called their Bhara or burden), but she herself will be very rich" (Stevenson 8). Each day and month within the year is regarded as either auspicious or inauspicious depending on the various proverbs. Should the predictions assume misfortune the parents may take preventive action. For example, "a bronze cup is filled with clarified butter, and a silver coin is put in it. The child is made to look into the cup, which is then taken to the father, who also gazes at his reflection" (Stevenson 8). After which the cup is given to a Brahmin, is it safe for the father to embrace his son. This kind of preventative action allows the son or daughter to overcome their ill-fate of being born on an inauspicious day. Astrology also plays a vital role in determining an auspicious day for the wedding ceremony further on in the child's life.

The birth of a child is always considered auspicious. However, historically in Hindu culture a first born male seems to induce a more positive celebration by the relatives and especially the parents. The desire for a boy results from the male's ability to pass on the family name and his ability to save the father from hell by performing his funeral ceremonies. Therefore, the wife bearing a boy ensures her place within the home of her husband. Nevertheless the birth of a girl is also an auspicious event and the parents still rejoice and welcome her however differently. If the first born be a girl the parents will rejoice and claim "Laksmi has come" (Stevenson 4). Laksmi is the Hindu goddess of prosperity. When the girl later takes a husband this "brings her parents as much merit as the performance of a great sacrifice" (Stevenson, 4).

## Naming of the Child: Namakarana Samskara

The naming ceremony *namakarana* occurs on the twelfth day after birth. However this can vary depending in gender as to which day is auspicious for the child whether it is an even or odd day. After the day is chosen the parents invite all the relatives over to share in ceremony, “where a mixture of millet, coconut and sugar is distributed amongst the guests present and sent to the houses of those who are not able to attend”(Stevenson 13). There is a threading procedure that takes place which joins the child to his/her cradle in protection against the Evil eye. The aunt who performs the threading also brings with her two pieces of gold, each weighing perhaps half a gram, one of which she ties on the cradle and one at the waist of the child for luck (Stevenson 13).

As this is taking place, within the common room of the house the family gathers to prepare for the aunt to announce the name of the child. Within the room a “square portion of the floor has been smeared with red clay, and on this *pipal* leaves have been placed” (Stevenson 13). The naming sacrament is also symbolic of the baby’s transition from the birthing room into the rest of the rooms within their new home. The baby girl is dressed in a red *sari* and placed in a hammock above the smeared red clay square. The corners of the *sari* “are held by the four nearest relatives of the child, they sing, and at the strategic moment the aunt pronounces the name” (Stevenson 14). The song runs (in Gujarati), “Cradle and pipala tree and leaves of the same, Aunt has chosen a name (Rama) as the baby’s name” (Stevenson 14). The child’s name takes much consideration. Not only do the first letters have to be synonymous with that belonging to the constellation under which he was born, it should also represent a great god. The child is given two additional names, one of which related to his fathers and that of his family.

## Conclusion

The article has provided a detailed description of the preliminaries and celebrations that take place within a traditional orthodox Hindu household throughout birth and babyhood. The article only mentions three of approximately fifteen of those described/prescribed within the Dharma and Grhya Sutras. The first of which was the *simantonnayana* samskara which highlight the prenatal care of the mother and unborn child. More specifically, the protection of the pregnant mother is emphasized through the parting of the hair from superstitions and the promotion of longevity. As the child is welcomed into the world he/she is celebrated with the *jatakarman* samskara which inspires strength, intelligence and long life. The three day feeding ritual referred to as *galasodi* which often takes place after the *jatakarman* samskara is also a reflection of the child's character. The final samskara mentioned in relation to birth rites is the *namakarana* samskara; the naming of the child. This sacrament provides the child with a name of which is symbolic of its astrological sign, the Hindu gods and his/her family name.

## **REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READINGS**

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