

Sacraments

Samskāra are sacraments or rites in which Hindus reaffirm their connection to the Divine. The Sanskrit word *samskāra* means “groove in the mind,” or colloquially, “upbringing,” and indicates rituals and ceremonies intended to leave deep spiritual impressions on the individual’s conscience. *Samskāra* generally mark significant life stages. Many *samskāra* are pan-Hindu, while others might be specific to a region, community, or even family. Thus the commemoration of any particular *samskāra* varies widely amongst Hindus.

Pre-Conception and Onwards

Many Hindus begin performing these *samskāra* before a child is even conceived. There is a sacrament that can be performed the second a couple decides that they want to have a child, another at the time of conception, and others at several points in the pregnancy, leading up to the sacrament when a child is delivered and the umbilical cord is cut.

Childhood Rites of Passage

There are many sacraments that Hindu parents may perform throughout a child’s life. Traditionally, the first sacrament is the naming ceremony. In many families, a Vedic astrologer might be consulted to provide the child’s star and planetary chart to recommend what letter the child’s name should begin with for an auspicious life. In some regions, the paternal aunt or specific family member may be tasked with selecting the name as part of a ceremony, and in conjunction with a family astrologist. The first time a child is taken outside the home to meet close friends and family, the child’s first bite of solid food, the child’s first haircut, and the first time the child has their ears pierced can all be marked by a *samskāra*. The inauguration of formal education is also marked by a ceremony inviting Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge, to bless the child.



Entering Young Adulthood

The thread ceremony is one of the most practiced Hindu sacraments. With this sacrament, a thread is hung over a boy’s left shoulder, and he is initiated with the Gayatri Mantra, which many Hindus believe is one of the most powerful mantras in the Vedas. The child is considered twice born after performing the thread ceremony, and is considered ready to begin studying the Vedas. Traditionally, both boys and

girls were given the sacred thread and members of non-Brahmin communities, but that changed over time. Today, some lineages are resurrecting the tradition not only for both girls and boys, but Hindus from all communities. There are other sacraments that some Hindus choose to perform when a girl comes of age to mark her ability to give life.

Marriage



Vivaha is considered the most important *samskāra* by many Hindus. Hindu weddings tend to be several days long, with many customs that vary by region and community in India, and around the world. Walking around the fire a specific number of times and taking seven steps together which are accompanied by seven promises, and listening to ancient Vedic mantras, however, are a constant facet of Hindu weddings around the world. The promises are to lead a healthy life; develop their physical, mental, and spiritual strength; to increase their material wealth and well-being; to live in love, respect, understanding, and faith; to care for their future children responsibly; to pray for the longevity of their relationship, and to be true and loyal to each other for their lifetimes.

Afterwards

Funerals are sobering events. Most Hindus are cremated, and their remains are immersed into the earth or a river. Sacraments involve purifying and cleansing the body before the corpse is cremated. Occasionally young children, pregnant women, and saints are buried instead of cremated because their souls are considered pure (in the case of pregnant women, their babies are) and it is thought that they do not need the ritual cleansing of cremation.

Key Takeaways

- Hindus believe that *samskāra* s are sacraments that leave an impression on an individual's consciousness.
- They are performed from before the soul is conceived until after the soul passes on from its physical body.