RITES OF PASSAGE: Hindu Rites

Hindu Rites

India is a land of many ethnic, tribal, and linguistic groups, and of numerous castes and sects, each with its distinctive customs and practices. This article does not presume to be an exhaustive survey of the rites of passage practiced by all these groups. Its scope is limited to those rites handed down in the mainstream Brahmanic tradition and described in its normative texts.

Rites of passage are defined as the rites that accompany a change of state, whether it be age or social position. This study will focus on three classifications formulated within the Hindu tradition that partly overlap and together indicate what we call rites of passage as well as the states that they initiate: sanśkāra, dīkṣā, and āśrama. I have also included rites performed at various junctures of an individual’s life even though there is no change of state; the Hindu category of sanśkāra includes these life-cycle rites, as well as strict rites of passage.

Sanśkāra. Hindu theologians define sanśkāra as a rite that prepares a person or thing for a function by imparting new qualities and/or by removing taints. It consecrates and purifies. The term, therefore, covers a broad group of preparatory rites, including sacrifices and the consecration of sacrificial utensils. The texts on Hindu domestic rites (Grhyaśūtras) and the law books (Dharmaśūtras) apply the term more specifically to rites associated with the human life cycle. “Sacrament,” the customary translation of sanśkāra, captures only a part of its significance and is liable to cause misunderstanding.

Sources do not agree on the number or the procedures of the sanśkāras. Some list as many as forty, using the term broadly to cover numerous domestic rites, while others give just twelve. The medieval handbooks enumerate sixteen. The descriptions of these rites also show marked discrepancies. The texts themselves acknowledge the existence of local and caste differences and often ask the reader to consult women, the custodians of folk customs. Our account, therefore, offers only a partial glimpse of these rites as they were performed at various times and places.

Marriage. It is customary for modern accounts of sanśkāras to begin with the prenatal rites. The Grhyaśūtras, however, begin with marriage, and for good reason. It is the central Hindu institution: only a married man accompanied by his wife is the complete persona religiosa entitled to perform the principal religious acts of sacrifice and procreation. The Vedic texts declare that a man becomes complete after securing a wife and begetting a son. Other sanśkāras either lead up to marriage or flow from it.

Sources contain detailed instructions regarding the selection of a partner, the marriageable age of a boy and a girl, the auspicious times for marriage, and the like. The betrothal takes place some time before the marriage: the father of the groom asks for the bride’s hand and her father formally gives his consent.

The rite of marriage, more than any other sanśkāra, is subject to local variations. Four rites, however, form the core of the ceremony:

1. Several oblations are made into the sacred fire.
2. The bridegroom takes the bride’s hand, saying: “I take your hand for happiness.”
3. He guides her three times around the fire. After each circumambulation he makes her step on a stone, saying: “Tread on this stone. Be firm like a stone. Overcome the enemies. Trample down the foes.”
4. He makes her take seven steps toward the northeast, saying: “Take one step for sap, two for juice, three for prospering in wealth, four for comfort, five for cattle, six for the seasons. Be my friend with your seventh step! May you be devoted to me. Let us have many sons. May they reach old age.” Most authorities consider these seven steps as the essential rite of matrimony; if the bridegroom dies before this rite is performed, the bride is not considered a widow.

After the marriage rite the couple goes to the husband’s home and remains chaste for three days. On the fourth day several rites are performed to ensure fertility, after which the marriage is consummated.

Prenatal sanśkāras. There are three principal rites performed before birth to promote conception and to ensure the safety of the mother and the fetus. Garbhādhāna, the conception rite, is performed between the fourth and the sixteenth day after the beginning of the wife’s monthly period. Pumsavāna, which literally means “quickening of a male child,” is performed in the third or fourth month of pregnancy to ensure a male progeny, and also contains ritual and medicinal safeguards against miscarriage. Simantonnayana, ceremonial parting of the mother’s hair, is performed between the fourth and the eighth month of pregnancy to protect the fetus from evil spirits.

It is very likely that the prenatal sanśkāras once formed a part of the marriage ceremony to promote the fertility of the bride. Their transfer to a later time may
have resulted from the progressive lowering of the marriageable age of girls. When prepubertal marriage became the custom, rites associated with intercourse and conception would have seemed inappropriate within the marriage ceremony. Some features of these samškaras, moreover, recall their original context. For example, invocations of many sons and prayers for fertility abound. Further, the conception rite, the parting of the hair, and, according to some, even the quickening of a male child are performed only for the first pregnancy. Accordingly, these rites are viewed by many Hindu theologians as directed at the purification of the mother rather than of the fetus.

Childhood samškaras. The largest number of samškaras belong to the period between birth and adolescence, the most precarious time of life in premodern societies. Sources differ widely regarding the number, the names, and the procedures of these rites. The most significant of them are: Jatakarman (birth rites), one of the oldest of the samškaras and performed immediately after birth; Nāmakarana (naming ceremony) on the tenth or the twelfth day after birth; Niśkramaṇa (exit from the birthing room) between the twelfth day and the fourth month from birth; Annapraśana (first eating of solid food) in the sixth month; Karnavedha (ear piercing) performed between the twelfth day and the fifth year; Cāḍākaraṇa or Caula (first haircutting) in the third year.

Samskāras of adolescence. While the childhood samškaras are aimed at protecting and nurturing the child, those of adolescence have a markedly social significance. They prepare the youth to assume the social and religious responsibilities of the adult world. They are, therefore, associated with education, and the teacher plays a central role in them.

The main samškara of adolescence is Vedic initiation (Upanayana). It is regarded as the second birth of the initiate. The teacher who performs the initiation and who imparts the Veda is said to bear the pupil within him like an embryo and to cause him to be born again in the Veda. Thus the brāhmaṇas, kṣatriyas, and vaiśyas, who form the first three social classes (varṇa), are called “twice-born” because they undergo initiation, whereas the śūdras, who are not qualified for initiation, are said to have only a single birth—the physical birth from the parents. Before initiation a child of the upper classes is not subject to the norms that minutely regulate the lives of adult Hindus, and, therefore, he is likened to a śūdra.

The standard age for initiation is eight years for brāhmaṇas, eleven for kṣatriyas, and twelve for vaiśyas, although all are permitted to undergo initiation at a younger or an older age. Men of the three upper classes who remain uninitiated after the ages of sixteen, twenty-two, and twenty-four respectively are considered sinners. Social intercourse with them is forbidden.

Before the rite the boy takes his final meal in the company of his mother. Then his head is shaved and he is bathed. He is given a girdle, a deerskin, a staff, and a sacred thread. The sacred thread consists of three cords, and each cord is made by twisting three strands. It is normally worn over the left shoulder and hangs under the right arm. Though the sacred thread is not mentioned in the earliest sources, it has come to be regarded as the central element of initiation and as the symbol of a person’s second birth. Today the rite is often called the “thread ceremony.” At first the thread was probably a substitute for the upper garment worn during ritual activities.

The teacher performs several symbolic acts that establish an intimate relationship between him and his new pupil. The initiatory rite reaches its climax when the teacher reaches over the pupil’s right shoulder, places his hand over the pupil’s heart, and says: “Into my will I take thy heart. Thy mind shall follow my mind. In my word thou shalt rejoice with all thy heart. May Brāhaspati join thee to me.” The teacher then imparts the sacred Sāvitrī formula: “That excellent glory of Savitr [Sun], the god, we meditate, that he may stimulate our prayers” (Rgveda 3.62.10). The centrality of these rites is pointed out by an ancient Vedic text, the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (11.5.4.12): “By laying his right hand on the pupil the teacher becomes pregnant with him. In the third night he is born a brāhmaṇa with the Sāvitrī.” The initiate, who is called a brahmacārin, then puts wood into the sacred fire. This is his first encounter with the sacrifice, the central religious act of the Vedic religion.

The pupil remains for many years at the teacher’s house, away from his home and family. This is a liminal period. The number of years is not determined; twelve, the number most often given, probably has a symbolic value, signifying completeness. The pupil is reduced to the level of a servant, without status, rank, or property; he obtains even his food by begging from house to house. Humility, obedience, and chastity are his main virtues.

Samāvartana is the samškara that concludes the period of studentship. Initiation separates the boy from the social community, while Samāvartana reincorporates the youth into the adult world. The term literally means the return of the scholar to his parents’ home after graduation. The central feature of the ceremony is a ritual bath. The rite, therefore, is often termed snāna.
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(bath), and the young graduate is called a snātika (the bathed). This feature, present also in the rite that ends the period of seclusion following the consecration (dikṣā) for a Vedic sacrifice, indicates that it is the concluding act of the initiatory ritual, rather than a separate sanśkāra. After the bath the youth discards the student's attire and puts on ornaments and fine clothes; he assumes his status in society. The young adult is now ready to get married and establish a household, and a search for a suitable bride will soon begin.

Funeral. The funeral is the last sanśkāra. It prepares a person for existence after death. From the earliest period of Indian history human remains were normally cremated. With the growth of sacrificial speculation in the late Vedic period, cremation came to be regarded as one's last sacrifice (Antyeshti), in which one's own body is offered in the fire. From this sacrifice the deceased person is born again into a new existence in the company of his or her ancestors. Vedic texts call it a person's third birth. The funeral, therefore, is a rite of passage from the earthly existence to the world of the fathers.

Cremation, however, does not conclude the funeral; it is believed that newly deceased people pass through a liminal period lasting twelve days or one year, during which they live as ghosts (pretas). The dead are then dangerous, and their relatives are impure. During this time special offerings of food and water are made for the newly deceased (Ekodisia-srādesha). On the twelfth day, which is the current practice, or after one year, the newly deceased person is ritually united with his or her dead ancestors through a rite called Sapitidakaranā. Four rice balls are prepared, three for the three preceding generations of ancestors and one for the newly dead person. The latter is cut into three parts, which are then mixed with the three balls intended for the ancestors. The union of rice balls symbolizes the union of the deceased with his or her ancestors. It is the final act of the funeral. Henceforth, the dead person will participate in all the normal offerings that his or her relatives will make to their ancestors.

The Upaniṣads contain information on a rite performed by a father when he feels that his death is imminent. In it he transfers his duties and powers—his ritual persona—to his son. This rite of transmission (Sampratti or Sampradāna) by which a son succeeds his father was later assimilated into the rite of renunciation, which also results in the ritual death of the father.

A remarkable feature of the funeral as well as the other sanśkāras is that they do not refer at all to the common Indian beliefs of rebirth (saṃstera) and liberation (mokṣa). These Hindu rituals are founded on a different worldview that celebrates life and fertility, shrinks from pollution and death, and, when death comes, ritually transports the dead to the world of the fathers.

Dikṣā. Like sanśkāra, dikṣā is a preparatory rite. It is, however, more closely associated with the assumption of a new state. While sanśkāras are obligatory for all, most dikṣās are undertaken voluntarily. It is, however, impossible to define either term precisely because they are often used as synonyms, and dikṣā frequently refers to a wide variety of purificatory and other rites.

The most famous dikṣā is the consecration of a man for a Vedic sacrifice. It prepares the sacrificer for the solemn act by purifying him and by transferring him to a new but temporary state similar to that of the gods. In dikṣā the sacrificer is ritually transformed into an embryo and is born again with a new and more perfect body. Many elements of the rite symbolize the birthing process. The consecrated man (dikṣita) is surrounded by taboos. He is sacred and dangerous: others are not allowed to touch him or to pronounce his name. At the conclusion of the sacrifice the consecratory period ends with a ritual bath, after which the sacrificer returns to his normal state.

The royal consecration is also called dikṣā. It shares many common features with the sacrificial dikṣā. Like the sacrificer, the new king is ritually reborn at his consecration. His period of dikṣā lasts a year, during which time he is deprived of his royal prerogatives.

In the post-Vedic religions of India the most common forms of dikṣā are associated with the entry into voluntary religious groups. The earliest such dikṣā was probably that of ascetics. Buddhist and Jain sources indicate that at a very early period these sects developed rites of entry into their respective monastic orders. Brahmanical sources contain information on the dikṣā of renouncers (saṃnyāsins) and forest hermits. These rites symbolically enact the death of the novice and his or her rebirth into the new ascetic life. Some rites include ordeals, such as pulling the hair by the roots and branding. At the conclusion of the rite the ascetic assumes a new name and the insignia of the new state: ascetic garb, tonsure, staff, begging bowl, and so forth. Initiatory rites of ascetics often assume an educational dimension in imitation of the Vedic initiation. The teacher plays an important role in them and imparts a secret formula (mantra) to the novice. The ascetic dikṣā begins a long period of training for the novice.

Medieval Hindu sects, where admission is not limited to ascetics, devised dikṣās for admitting lay members. They are patterned after the Vedic initiation and are re-
garded as constituting a new birth of the initiate. In some sects, such as the Virasaiva, the voluntary nature of dikṣā is eliminated and a child is initiated at birth. Admission to each higher level or rank within a sect also entails special dikṣas.

Dikṣā introduces a new state, either temporary like the sacrificer's or permanent like the ascetic's. The term, therefore, is used as a synonym of vrata (vow) that often indicates a special mode of life. This meaning of dikṣā is very close to that of āśrama.

Āśrama. By the sixth century BCE new religious ideas advocating a life of renunciation, celibacy, and poverty were sweeping the Ganges River valley. New religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism, broke with the Vedic tradition. Considering human beings as bound to an endless cycle of births and deaths, they questioned the value of central Vedic institutions such as sacrifice and marriage, and of society as such.

There were brahman thinkers at this time who advocated these new ideals but were unwilling to break with the Vedic tradition. They attempted to find theological formulas that would give scriptural legitimacy to renunciation while maintaining the religious significance of marriage and other Vedic institutions. One such formula was the system of the āśramas. Historically it was the most significant.

The term āśrama in all probability referred originally to "places of austerity" or hermitages. Its meaning was then extended to include lifestyles devoted to religious exertion. The term has the latter meaning when used within the context of the āśrama system. Its earliest formulation, which I shall call the preclassical, is found in the ancient law books, the Dharmashastras, the earliest of which were composed around the fifth century BCE. The preclassical system considers the four āśramas—Vedic student, householder, forest hermit, and renouncer—not as temporary stages but as permanent vocations. A young adult, after completing the period of study following Vedic initiation, is allowed to choose one of these āśramas. It is clear, therefore, that in the preclassical system the first āśrama was that of a permanent student, who remained with the teacher until death. The temporary period of study following initiation, on the other hand, was not regarded as an āśrama but as a period of preparation for all āśramas.

Āśrama represents a theological understanding and evaluation of several social institutions; it cannot be equated with the institutions themselves. They existed prior to the invention of the āśrama system, and even afterwards continue to exist independently of that system both within and outside the Hindu tradition. Certain forms of Hindu marriage and the renunciation of women and śādhas, for example, fall outside the āśrama system. The system gives the institutions religious legitimacy. The āśramas are proposed as a new fourfold division of dharma, paralleling its older division into the four social classes (varṇa), and as four alternative paths leading to the heavenly world. These institutions are thus made integral parts of dharma and, therefore, of the Vedic tradition.

Although it represented an important theological breakthrough for Brahmanism, the preclassical system had several drawbacks. It allowed choice in a matter of dharma. Choice or option was never encouraged by Brahmanic hermeneutics; even in minor matters of ritual it was used as a last resort in interpreting conflicting injunctions. Choice with regard to how one will spend one's adult life, moreover, gave rise to debates on the relative superiority of the āśramas and in particular eliminated the obligatory nature of marriage. Some used the Vedic theory of the three duties of man—study, procreation, and sacrifice—as an argument against the āśrama system: if one does not marry, one is not able to repay the debts of procreation and sacrifice. Others even suggested that the Veda authorized only one āśrama, namely that of the householder.

Toward the beginning of the common era a new formulation of the āśrama system, which I shall call the classical, gained wide acceptance. It is given in the authoritative Laws of Manu, composed in the early centuries of the common era. The preclassical system all but disappeared from the later Hindu tradition, and even modern scholars are often ignorant of its very existence.

The classical system conceived of the āśramas not as permanent vocations but as temporary stages of life through which an individual passes as he grows old. The āśrama system thus came to parallel the saṃskāra system, and the two central saṃskāras—initiation and marriage—became the rites of entry into the first two āśramas. The first āśrama is no longer the permanent studentship but the temporary period of study following initiation. Thus, according to Manu, a person should undergo initiation and live the first part of his life in the student's āśrama. After graduation (Samāvartana) he should marry and enter the householder's āśrama. When he is a grandfather and when, as Manu says, he sees his hair turning gray and his skin wrinkled, he should retire to the forest as a hermit. After spending some time there, he should enter the fourth āśrama, renunciation.

These, then, are the states that recur in the life of each individual. They are viewed as four rungs in the ladder leading up to liberation. The ladder image re-
places the path image of the preclassical system. The rites of passage from one āśrama to the next are called sanskāra and dīkṣā indiscriminately. The passage, however, takes place only in one direction; one is not permitted to return to an āśrama one has left. A person who does so—for example, a renouncer who reverts to the household life—is considered an outcaste.

The classical system eliminates choice and reaffirms the centrality of the household. The ascetic orders are relegated to old age and retirement. The Vedic doctrine of three debts, once used as an argument against the preclassical system, is now seen as a scriptural basis for the āśramas. Payment of the debts is carried out by passing through at least the first two āśramas.

The third āśrama (forest hermit) had already become obsolete by the early centuries of the common era. Passage through the other three āśramas is today, as it probably was even during the time of Manu, an ideal rather than a reality in the lives of most Hindus. Yet the theological understanding of these four central socioreligious institutions as hierarchical stages of life that one enters and leaves through rites of passage became a cornerstone of Hindu doctrine and practice. It is this theology that has given āśrama a place alongside varṇa as the two pillars of Hinduism and made the compound term varṇāśrama-dharma the closest Sanskrit approximation to the foreign term Hinduism.

Women and Rites of Passage. Hinduism has always been a patriarchal religion. Women play a decidedly secondary role in it. This is especially so with regard to ritual activity. It is generally accepted that the prenatal and childhood sanskāras, and of course the funeral, are performed also for women belonging to the twice-born varṇas. The Vedic formulas normally recited at these rites, however, are omitted, since women are forbidden to study the Veda. However, there is some evidence to suggest that in ancient times girls were allowed to be initiated and to study the Veda. By the time of Manu’s lawbook this practice had been discontinued. Marriage, it was claimed, constituted initiation for women.

The position of women in Hindu sects varies considerably. The major sects follow the Brahmanic prohibition against female initiation. Many fringe and anti-structural sects, such as the Vīraśaiva, however, admit women to initiation and full membership.

Women are also excluded from direct participation in the āśrama system. In marriage and, according to some, also in the hermit’s āśrama, a woman participates in the āśrama of her husband. Female renouncers are found in Buddhism, Jainism, and in many medieval Hindu sects, and even mainstream Brahmanism acknowledges their existence. A woman’s life in these ins-

stitutions, however, is not theologically interpreted as constituting an āśrama.

Śādras and Rites of Passage. Śādras, by which I mean all the groups that do not belong to the twice-born varṇas, are excluded from reciting or even hearing the Veda. Thus they cannot be admitted to Vedic initiation. It is quite likely, however, that these groups did possess their own initiatory rites, although no information on them has come down to us. Regarding the other sanskāras, however, there is a conflict of opinion. Some hold that no sanskāra should be performed for a śādra, while others allow them the prenatal and childhood sanskāras, as well as marriage and funeral rites, but without Vedic formulas.

Śādras are similarly excluded from the āśrama system, though some authorities recognize their marriage as an āśrama. Many medieval sects permit a type of dīkṣā for śādras and admit them to membership.

Conclusion. Hinduism has no single dogma or doctrine. Its cohesion is found in its rites and observances. The central rites of Hinduism, whether it be mainstream Brahmanism or sectarian cults, have traditionally been the rites of passage.

The situation in modern India, however, is very different. The only sanskāras regularly practiced today are marriage and funeral. Vedic initiation, where it is still practiced, has become the prerogative of brahmans to such a degree that the sacred thread has become the hallmark of a brahman.

The practice has changed, but the theology has remained the same: the modern Hindu villager as well as the modern Hindu theologian will, if asked, define Hinduism as varṇāśrama-dharma.

[For further discussion of rites performed in the home, see Domestic Observances, article on Hindu Practices. A detailed overview of the Hindu dharma literature is provided in Sūtra Literature and Sāstra Literature. For discussion of the special rites involving the fourth and final āśrama, see Saṁnyāsa.]

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**Patrick Olivelle**

**Jewish Rites**

Judaism has a highly developed series of rites that mark both initiatory and transformative moments in the lives of Jews. The rituals permit both the individual and the community to experience in an orderly and regulated manner the changing status of the Jew’s relationship to other individuals and to society as a whole. Although some of the rites may have originated in other neighboring cultures, once adopted they were thoroughly judaized. Their meaning for the Jewish people is to be sought not in their origin but in their function in Jewish society. Some rites have changed little in the millennia since their introduction. Others have been radically transformed. In this article I describe the rites as they are currently practiced, with special emphasis on the Jewish community of North America.

In general, the rites are rooted in biblical regulations (*mitzvot*, “commandments”) that were refined and standardized in the Talmudic and medieval periods. Although Jewish law (*halakhah*) defines the essential elements in each rite, local customs (*minhagim*) provide some degree of variation from community to community.

During the last century and a half, Judaism became divided into four streams, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist, and this has created an increased divergence in the liturgy and ritual of life cycle ceremonies. The greatest divergence from standard traditional practice as defined by the Talmud and the later legal codes occurs in Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism. In addition, the growth of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s has had a significant impact on life cycle ceremonies in the non-Orthodox movements: new rituals have been created specifically for women and some standard rituals have been made more egalitarian by the inclusion of women as equal participants or by the removal of sexist language.

**Circumcision, Naming, Redemption of the Firstborn.** The male initiatory rite is *berit milaḥ* (“covenant of circumcision”). It involves the surgical removal of the foreskin of the penis and the recitation of prayers that welcome the infant into the Jewish people by initiating him into the covenant of Abraham (Gn. 17:11ff.). The rite takes place on the eighth day after birth, counting the day of birth as the first day. So significant is the eighth day that even if it falls on the Sabbath or a festival, the circumcision is not postponed.

Circumcision was practiced by other ancient Near Eastern peoples, probably as a fertility rite, but among Jews it became the physical sign of belonging to the Jewish people. [See Circumcision.] In the Hebrew Bible, circumcision is first mentioned in the injunction proclaimed by God to the ninety-nine-year-old Abraham, that instructed him to circumcise himself and the male members of his household:

God further said to Abraham, “As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep my covenant. Such shall be my covenant between me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. . . . Thus shall my covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact.” (Gn. 17:9–13)

In Jewish law, it is the father’s responsibility to circumcise his son. As a practical matter, however, it is rare for a father to perform the actual operation. Generally, he appoints a specially trained ritual circumciser, a *mohel*, to perform the rite in his stead. Jewishness does not depend on being circumcised, since any child born of a Jewish mother is a Jew. (In Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, a Jew is anyone born to either a Jewish mother or father, who is raised exclu-