



CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CHILDHOOD SANSKARAS (SACRAMENTS) IN LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

India has a rich cultural heritage which affects the life of a person at all stages of life. Hinduism is one of the oldest world religions prevailing in Indian subcontinent. Hindu mythology describes various *Sanskaras* (sacraments/religious rites) outlined from birth to death of an individual. Out of the sixteen *Sanskaras* described, eight are for children. These are *Jata Karma* (birth rites), *Namakaran* (naming), *Nishkraman* (taking baby out of home), *Annaprashan* (starting solid feeding), *Chudakarma* (head shaving), *Karnavedhana* (piercing of the ear), *Upanayan* (thread ceremony) and *Vedarambha* (start of formal education).

This article analyzed these *Sanskaras* in detail and gives a critical approach to their relevance in light of modern scientific knowledge. Though primarily considered as religious rites, they were significant in context of child health and provided opportunity for routine examination of child at regular intervals. *Sanskara* prepares one for the next stage of growth. A thorough review of childhood *Sanskaras* revealed that they were aimed at preparing the baby for extra uterine life successfully, developed proper feeding habits, ensured adequate nutrition, prevented diseases, adapted baby to environment for further survival, gave individual identity and educated the child. It took care of not only physical but also mental, social and spiritual development of child, thus made him a responsible youth of good character who proved to be an asset to the society. These *sanskaras* are apt till date and worth practicing in today's era.

KEY WORDS: *Sanskara, Jata Karma, Namakaran, Nishkraman, Annaprashan, Karnavedhana.*

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda is the science of life. It is the *Upveda* of *Atharvaveda*. Many topics in Ayurveda correlate well with religious texts of ancient India. Ancient Hindu mythology described sixteen *Sanskara* (religious rites) for a person^[1]. Sequentially, these ceremonies were outlined to fulfill one's role from the beginning to the end of life. Each significant stage of the sacred life of human being was celebrated. Those performed in intrauterine life were *Garbhadhana* (conception acceptance ceremony), *Punsavana* (ceremony of graceful care of embryo for achieving desired progeny) and *Seemantonayana* (for improving intelligence of fetus). Those performed in children were *Jata Karma* (birth rites), *Namakaran* (naming), *Nishkraman* (taking

baby out of home), *Annaprashan* (starting solid feeding), *Chudakarma* (head shaving), *Karnavedhana* (piercing of the ear), *Upanayan* (thread ceremony) and *Vedarambha* (start of formal education). Those performed in youth and later life were *Samavartan* (ending of formal education/ ceremony to accept the grown-up as a qualified individual), *Vivah* (marriage), *Vanaprastha* (introspection and reassessment of the goals of life), *Sanyas* (leaving family life/complete renunciation) and *Antyeshti* (last rites after death/ cremation). Of all these *Sanskara* Ayurvedic treatise described only *Garbhadhana*, *Punsavan* and the childhood *Sanskara*.

According to the Upanishad, *Sanskara* go a long way in fulfilling the four pursuit of life i.e. *Dharma* (righteousness), *Artha* (wealth), *Kama* (work and pleasure) and *Moksha* (salvation). Though primarily considered as religious rites, they were relevant in context of child health and provided opportunity for routine examination of child at regular intervals. *Sanskara* prepare one for the next stage of growth. Thus, a detailed study of the classical description of *Sanskara* is mandatory to understand its significance in child health and its aptness in present era.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The materials were collected from the classical Ayurvedic literatures, magazines and research journals.

Number of *Sanskara*

The number of *Sanskara* varies in different Hindu religious texts; it is about 16-40. In *Grihya* sutra there is mentioning of 18-21 *Sanskara*. The 16 *Sanskara* explained by Maharshi Dayanand are widely accepted and consensus among scholars of Ayurveda.

Classical Description & Relevance

The detailed analysis of each *Sanskara*, classical description & their relevance is as follows:

1). *Jata Karma Sanskara*: The word '*Jata*' means born or brought into existence^[2]. This is the first *Sanskara* performed after birth of a baby. According to *Acharya Charaka*^[3], after the initial stabilization of baby (*Prana pratyagamana*) and cord cutting, *Jata Karma* should be performed. First of all, the child should be given honey and ghee impregnated with *mantra* prescribed for this purpose in Veda. Thereafter, following the same procedure, milk from the right breast should be given to the child. An earthen jar filled with water should be impregnated with *mantra* and kept near the head of the child. *Acharya Sushruta*^[4] has opined *Jata karma* as cleaning the vernix on newborn's body, clearing newborn's mouth by *Saindhava* (rock salt) and *Sarpi* (ghee) and placing a ghee soaked cotton on baby's head. This is followed by cutting of umbilical cord at distance of eight *Angula* from baby's skin and tying it by thread which is tied to baby's neck. After this baby should be given to lick gold *Bhasma* mixed with honey and ghee. *Acharya Vagbhatta* prescribes *Prajapatya vidhi* in *Jata Karma* described in texts of *Dharmashastra*.^[5]

Relevance: *Jata karma* is the birth rite which helps the baby transcend from intrauterine life to extra uterine life. Clearing the mouth of secretions clears airway and prevents aspiration. Cleaning the vernix provides tactile stimulation to the baby to make it breath or cry. Placing cotton soaked in ghee on head maintains temperature of the baby and provides insulation. It prevents heat loss from baby's head, which has the largest surface area, thus preventing hypothermia. Only after the baby is stabilized cord was cut, emphasizing on resuscitative measures. Tying the cord to baby's neck by thread prevents bleeding from cord and minimizes chances of infection of cord by soiling in stool and urine. Sufficient length of cord is left to avoid straining of cord while tying and at the same time not letting it hang too loose. *Swarnaprashan* given to baby by gold *Bhasma*, honey and ghee serves the purpose of both nutrition and immunization. Honey and ghee have a high caloric value, giving energy to baby whose previous source of nutrition from placenta has stopped. Honey also serves as a mild allergen, which gives the first opportunity to baby's body to start the synthesis of antibodies, thus shielding the baby from infections. Also this first feed initiates gastrointestinal movements and activates the gut. *Swarna* (gold) *bhasma* gives physical protection to baby, enhances brain development and is in micro particles easily absorbable by baby's intestine. This *Lehana* (licking of medicine preparations) also gives an opportunity to physician to assess the rooting and sucking reflex of neonate. Use of *Mantra* in *Jata karma* gives psychological support to parents especially mother. A relaxed, confident attitude of mother helps the milk ejection reflex. Breast feeding is to be given on the first day so as to ensure proper nutrition and protective immunoglobulin present in colostrum. Early initiation of breast feed also stimulates prolactin reflex. When the baby sucks, the nerve ending in the nipple carry message to the anterior pituitary which in turn release prolactin and that acts on the alveolar glands in the breast to stimulate milk secretion^[6]. It also stimulates oxytocin reflex which is the milk ejection reflex. The water filled earthen jar may serve cooling purpose or maintenance of humidity in baby's ward room.

2). *Namakaran Sanskara* (Naming ceremony of baby): This ceremony is performed on the 10th, 11th or 12th day after birth. The mother and child should bath in water treated with all

fragrant herbs like sandalwood, white mustard and *Lodhra* (*Symplocos racemosus*). The mother should put on light new and clean garments and wear light, pure and variegated ornaments. The baby should be wrapped in new cloths and the parents should declare baby's salutations to God and Brahmins. The baby's head should be placed in north or east. The father of child should give it two names, one name denoting the constellation under which the baby was born (*Nakshatrik*) and the other of intending meaning (*Abhiprayika*). The stellar name should be identical with that of the stellar deity and should be either bisyllabic or tetrasyllabic. The meaningful name should have a consonant (*Ghosh*) for its first letter and a semi vowel (*Anthyastha*) for its last letter and should be free of diphthongs (*Vridhhi*). It should be reminiscent of one of the three ancestors, namely parents, grandparents or great grandparents and appropriate for the family tradition.^[7] *Acharya Sushruta*^[8] and *Vagbhatta*^[9] have also described *Namakaran* on 10th and 10th or 12th day respectively.

Relevance: Name of an individual signifies his identity and individuality. The appropriate time for naming ceremony is tenth day onwards. This is the time when child has successfully passed the vulnerable early neonatal period (birth to seven days) which bears maximum risk of infections, sepsis, neonatal jaundice, etc. Naming ceremony thus provides an opportunity for examination of baby in late neonatal period. As newborn health is indeed the key to child health and survival, *Namakaran sanskara* has an important place. As the name is given by father, it helps develop a parental bonding with baby and understanding of parental responsibilities. Bathing of mother and baby with medicated water also ensures hygiene and disinfection. *Lodhra* used has *Shoethnashaka* (reduces inflammation) and *Vranaropaka* (wound healing) properties^[10] and is categorized under *Artava sangrahaniya*^[11] (controls excessive vaginal bleeding). Keeping the baby's head towards north or east where maximum illumination of sunlight is present makes any inflammation on head like unsubsidized cephalohematoma visible.

3). Nishkraman Sanskara: It is the ceremony of invoking God's blessings to expose the new comer to the outside world and to pray for the well being of the baby. In the fourth month after giving bath, the baby should wear new cloths and ornaments and should be taken to the family

temple, i.e. out of the house for the first time^[12]. In the temple religious offering should be offered to the god. The baby should be blessed by the priest and elders and should be taken back home. A pediatrician should be present when the baby comes back home. He should bless him and do a thorough routine checkup^[13].

Relevance: Nishkraman sanskara is taking out the baby for the first time. The time described for this in our texts is fourth month which is appropriate as by this time baby develops enough immunity and tolerance to external environment. The presence of a *Vaidya* (pediatrician) on this occasion provides an opportunity for routine check up and examination of normal milestones development in baby like presence of neck holding, no head lag when pulled to sit, head above the plane of trunk on ventral suspension, hand eye coordination, bidextrous grasp approach to a dangling ring, laughing loud, social smile and recognition of mother.^[14] During this *Sanskara* the baby gets in an unfamiliar environment when his reaction in form of social smile, anxiety, fear, laugh or reaction to sound of bell can be observed. Persistence of primitive reflexes, if any can also be noticed.

4). Annaprashan Sanskara: The physician should prescribe feeding of various fruits in sixth month. Later after eruption of teeth or in tenth month, feeding of cereals should be started. *Acharya Kashyap* also indicates feeding of meat soup. Food should be mashed properly before giving and mouth should be cleaned by water after feed. Diet amount should be increased gradually. In case of disease specific diet should be given like *Mridvika* (Grapes), honey, *Ghrita* in *Pitta* predominance and *Vidanga* (*Embelia ripens*), salt, fat and *Kodrava* (a type of cereal) in diarrhea. *Acharya Vagbhatta* as well as *Sushruta* opine sixth month as appropriate time for *Annaprashan*^[16,17]

Relevance: Modern day pediatricians recommend exclusive breast feeding till six months, supplemental food should be started only after that. This is exactly the same as recommended by our authors. The food is properly mashed to avoid difficulty in deglutition. Cleaning by *Jal Acamana* (water) indicates the highly developed sense of oral hygiene. Specific food which is beneficial in respective diseases is also prescribed. Starting the intake of fruits offers energy as well as vital vitamins and minerals to baby. This ceremony

can also be useful for assessment of developmental milestones like rolling over, sitting with own support in tripod fashion, unidextrous reach, stranger anxiety and monosyllabic speech at sixth month. Teeth eruption in children also begins around this age. Hence proper dentition is also to be looked for. Similarly annaprashan at tenth month offers assessment of bisyllabic speech, waving bye-bye, immature pincer grasp and standing with support. Weight of child can also be assessed.

5). Chudakarma Sanskara: This is head shaving ceremony. In this religious ceremony, the hair of child's scalp is cut for the first time. This is performed in the first or third year according to *Grihya sutra* and *Paraskar sutra* respectively. One should take as much care while shaving the hair of baby as one would take during that of king.

Relevance: *Acharya Sushruta* opines that *Shikha* (special arrangement of hair on top on scalp which is left during *Chudakarma* sanskara) is the site of *Sira* (vessels) and *Sandhi* (sutures) and this hair acts as a protective layer. Cutting of hair gives lightness and prosperity.^[18] This *Sanskara* gives a chance for examination of skull and growth of hair. Detection of abnormalities like craniocynostosis, wide sutures, microcephaly, macrocephaly, elevated or depressed fontanelle etc. Palpation of scalp carefully may also reveal cranial defects or craniotabes.

6). Karnavedhana Sanskara: Pricking of the ears serves ornamental purpose as well as protect baby from diseases. Our *Acharya* have recommended sixth, seventh or eighth month for this rite in cold climate.^[19, 20] The child should be held in lap and ear pricked in center of lobule, avoiding blood vessels and nerves by seeing it against sunlight. Increasing of pierced hole should be done by oil soaked cotton or small *Nimba* (*Azadirachta indica*) twig or smooth ear ring made of lead.

Relevance: Ear piercing inflicts a small injury and triggers active immune mechanism of baby. It thus prepares the immunity of baby against any possible infection or injury. Modes to increase the pierced hole offer lubrication and prevention of wound infection. Selection of winter for the procedure also decreases chance of infection. Holding ear lobule against sun visualizes course of fine vessels, to avoid bleeding.

7). Upanayana Sanskara: It is school entrance initiation ceremony. It helps control the fear of separation from parents, and to help overcome the anxiety of entering a strange place. It is also called *Yajnopaveet Sanskara*. This *Sanskara* makes the child enter student life and perfect discipline. According to *Grihya Sutra*, it is performed at 8 yrs (*Brahmin*), 11 yrs (*Kshatriya*) and 12 yrs (*Vaishya*). While according to *Manusmriti*, it is done at 5 yrs (*Brahmin*), 6 yrs (*Kshatriya*) and 8 yrs (*Vaishya*). This is done before starting of puberty and not after completion of *Yuva avastha*. According to the *Atri Smriti* a man is born a *Shudra*; by performing the *Upanayana Sanskara* he becomes a *Dvija* (twice born).

Relevance: After the *Upanayana* is performed, the young lad becomes a *Dvija* i.e. twice born as this *Sanskara* signifies spiritual rebirth. The brain growth of the child gets completed up to the age of 5 years. So *Manu's* opinion of starting the education by 5 years seems to be more logical.

8). Vedarambha - It is also called *Vidyarambha*, *Akshararambha* or *Akshara lekhana sanskara*. This is education enrichment ceremony which is undertaken when the child is of five years age. Child is made to write with his index finger on raw rice in a bell metal vessel. Either the father of the child or an eminent teacher officiates at this ritual.^[21] In this *Sanskara*, each student, according to his lineage, masters his own branch of the *Veda*. It signifies the student's commitment to learning and the teacher's to teaching, and involves a *Homa* and many prayers.^[22]

Relevance: Starting formal education at five years is apt in today's era also, as by this time a normal child learns to walk, run, climb stairs, tell his name and gender, play cooperatively in a group, copy simple diagrams, use pencil, say song, poem, story, feed by himself and can go to toilet alone. Thus, a child of this age can adjust well if sent to a *Gurukul* (formal schools). It is also time for assessment of mental growth of child.

Other Minor Sanskara

Surya Chandra darshana^[23] (**Exposing baby to sun and moonlight**): After completing the immediate management of the born child, after performing protective measures, auspicious oblations and other means of securing prosperity, showing of the rising sun along with

its worship and showing of moon in first part of night should be done in the first month itself.

Relevance: Exposing the baby to early morning sun is essential for photo-conversion by the ultraviolet band of sunlight for synthesis of Vitamin D.

Dolashayan sanskar (Keeping the baby in cradle for first time): It is done on 12th and 13th day for male and female respectively.

Relevance: This ceremony signifies that the baby is kept on mother's cot before twelfth day. This is similar to rooming in of contemporary age. This prevents hypothermia, increases confidence in mother, increases mother baby bond stimulating adequate milk synthesis and secretion. Placing baby on stable bed in early neonatal period instead of swinging cradle prevents chances of intraventricular hemorrhage which may be possible due to rough movements in cradle.

Upvistan sanskara^[24] (Sitting ceremony): On an auspicious occasion in the fifth month (*Vagbhata*) or sixth month, the infant should be made to sit on ground with support for some time. The place where baby is allowed to sit should be clean, leveled and away from water, fire and sharp instruments. The baby should not be allowed to sit for a long time as it leads to kyphosis, exhaustion, weakness of waist, stiffness of body etc. During an illness child should not be allowed to sit^[25]. The child should be allowed to sit for a longer period gradually.

Relevance: Sixth month is the appropriate age for developing sitting with support milestone of baby. So this is the time when *Acharya Kashyap* recommends the *Upvistan sanskar*. Baby is allowed to sit only for a short time as if left for longer time, it may lead to complications. He may fall and get injured. In addition, chances of ant and insect bites increase as the attendant may not be attentive for a long time. ^[26]

Conclusion: *Sanskara* are rites performed with an objective of imparting positive qualities in a person. They improve a person while removing his undesirable attributes. The childhood *Sanskara* aim at preparing the baby for extrauterine life successfully, develop proper feeding habits, ensure adequate nutrition, prevent diseases, adapt to environment for further survival, give individual identity and educate the child. Just as a picture is painted by various colors, character of a person is formed, guided and molded by undergoing various

Sanskara. It takes care of not only physical health but also prevents various psychosocial discrepancies, imparts higher sanctity to life, thus making him a responsible youth of good character who proves to be an asset to the society.

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