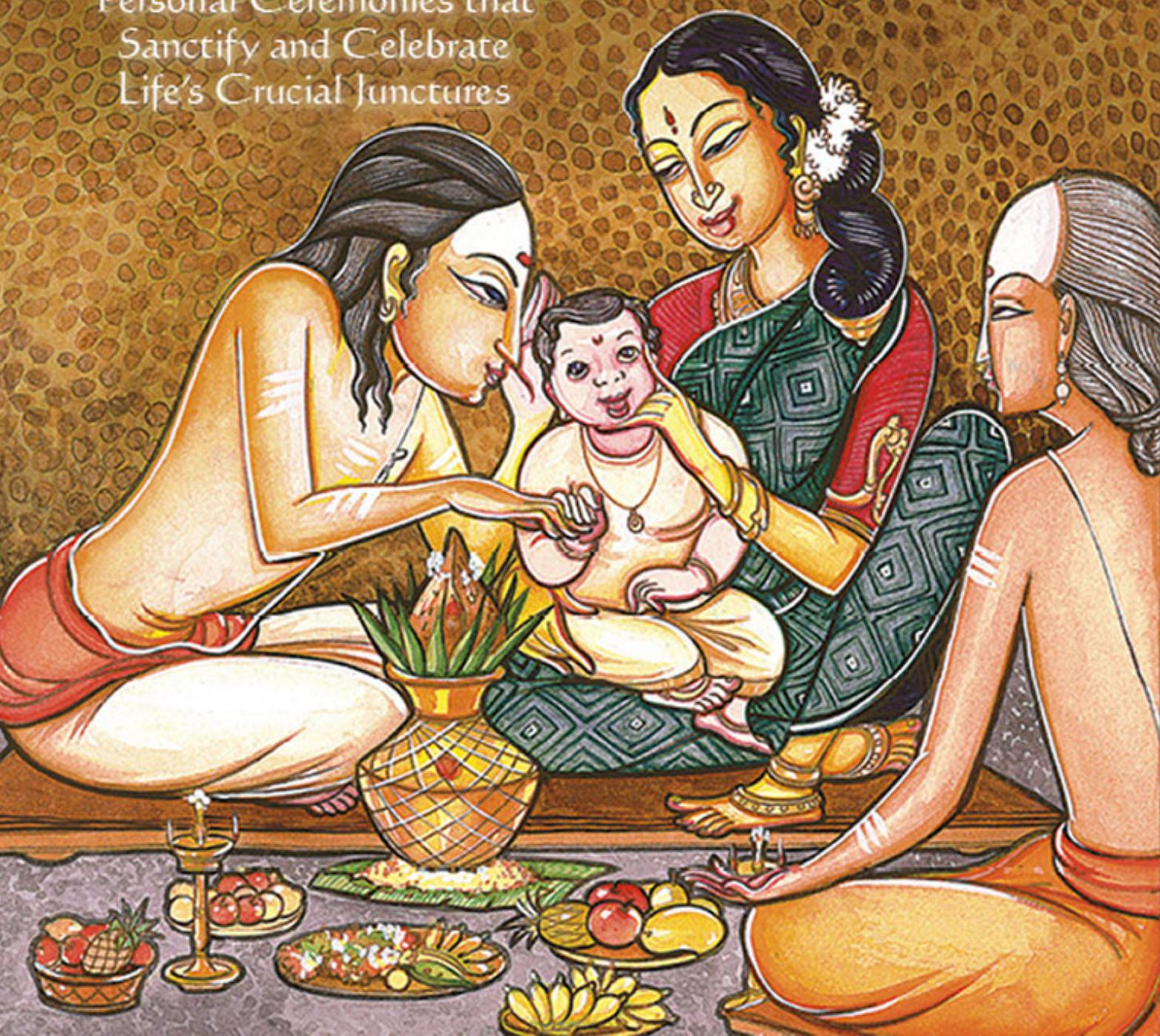
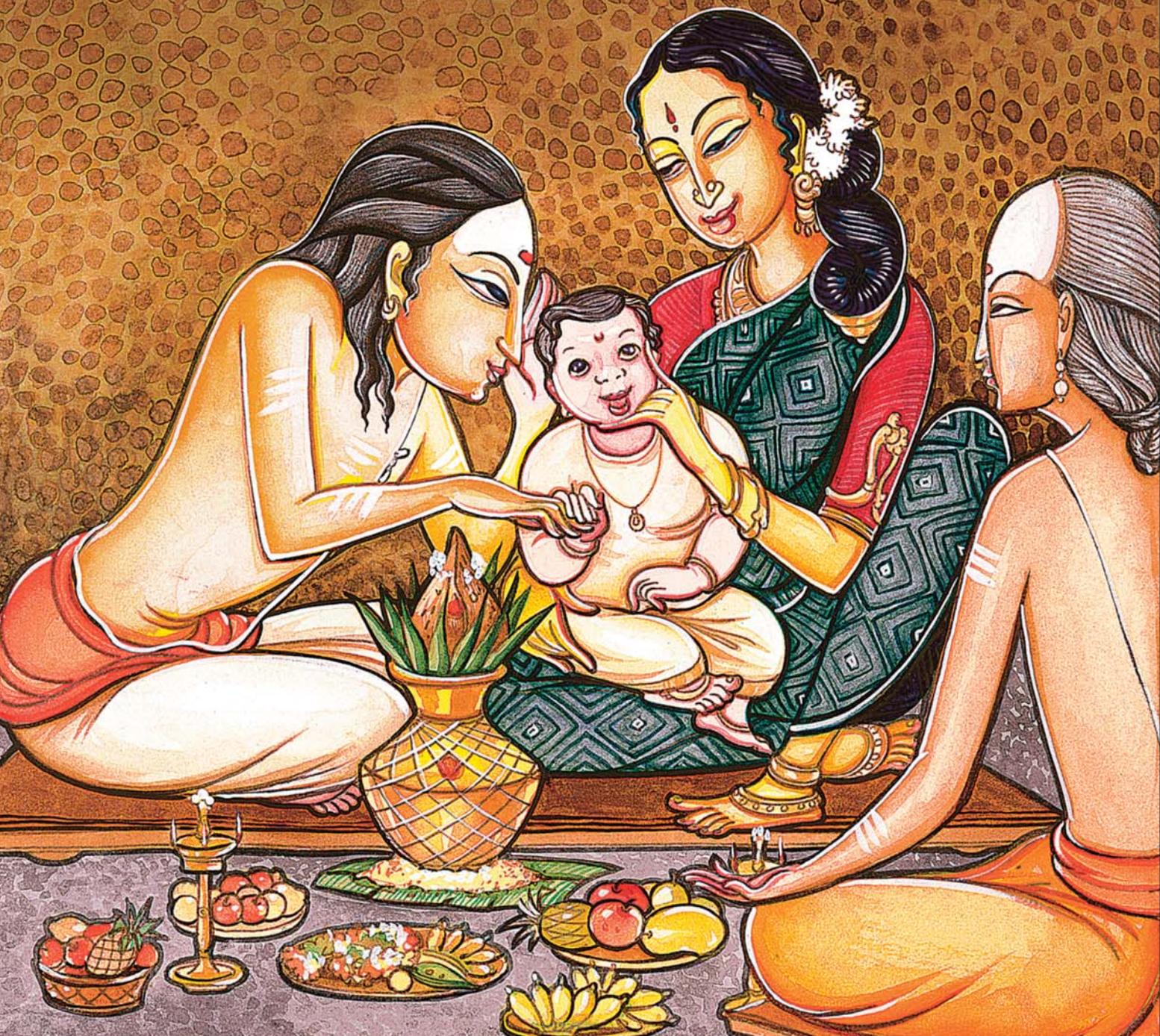


Rites of Passage

Personal Ceremonies that
Sanctify and Celebrate
Life's Crucial Junctures



Rites of Passage

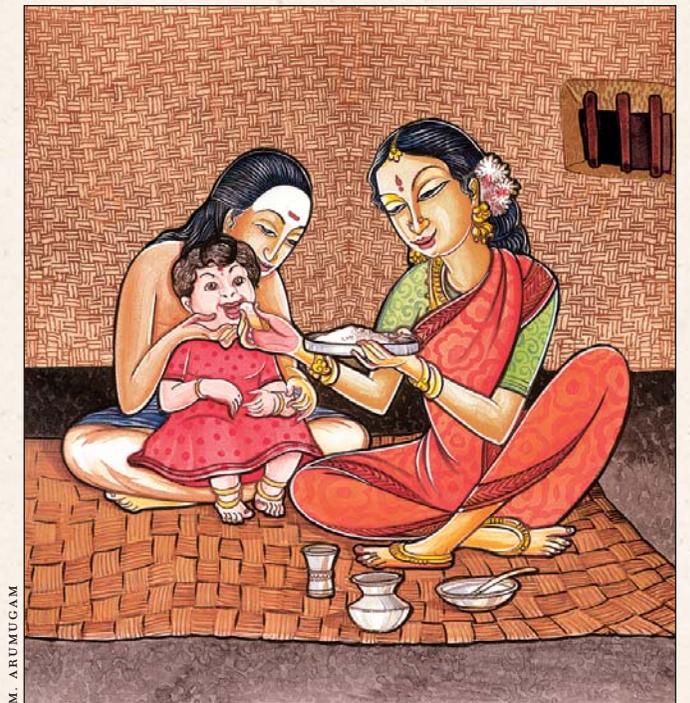


Personal Ceremonies that Sanctify and Celebrate Life's Crucial Junctures

FOR THE HINDU, LIFE IS A SACRED JOURNEY; and every step from birth to death is marked, and thus acknowledged, through traditional ceremony, called *samskara*. A *samskara* is an enduring impression etched into the malleable substance of a person's mind at a psychological point in life. During these Hindu rites of passage, a temple or home ceremony deeply influences the soul and directs life along the path of dharma. There are many types of *samskaras*, from the rite prior to conception to the funeral ceremony. Each one, properly observed, empowers spiritual life, preserves religious culture and establishes bonds with inner worlds as the soul consciously accepts each succeeding discovery and duty in the order of God's creation. Religious *samskaras* serve two purposes. First, they mark clearly within our minds the occasion of an important life transition. Second, they solicit special blessings from the devas and Deities, society and village, family and friends. These blessings and feelings of love have a markedly positive effect, stabilizing the mind so that the deeper meanings of life can unfold within us. Of the many Hindu *samskaras*, eight are illustrated and described in this chapter.

Namakarana, Name-Giving

(Pictured at left) The Hindu name-giving rite, *namakarana* *samskara*, is one of the essential rites of passage. It is performed in the home or the temple, usually when the child is 11 to 40 days old. The father whispers the infant's name in his right ear.

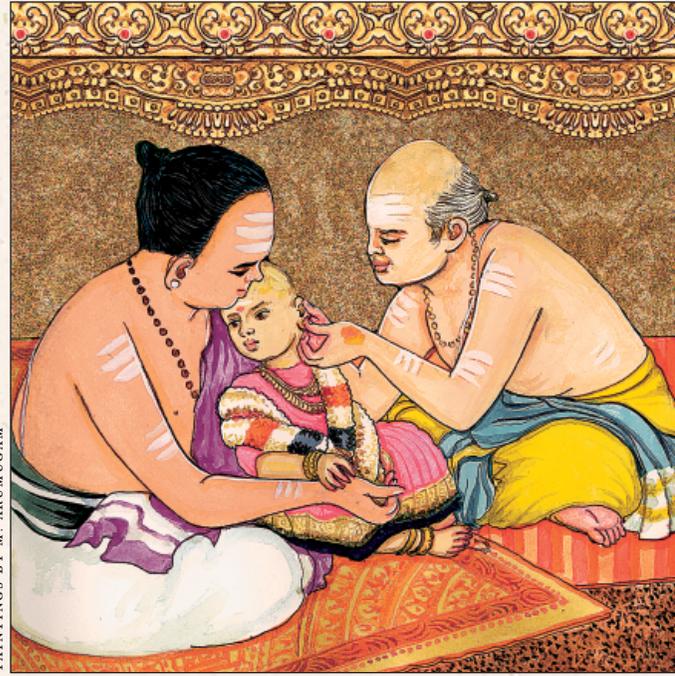


Anna Prasana, First Solid Food

During the *anna prasana* *samskara*, solid food is fed to the child for the first time. This is done by the father or the mother in the temple or at home. The choice of food, such as rice, offered to a child at this crucial time of life is said to help forge his or her destiny.

The best rendering of *samskara* in English is made by the word *sacrament*, which means "religious ceremony or act regarded as an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace." *Sacrament* also means "confirmation of some promise or oath; things of mysterious significance, sacred influence and symbol."

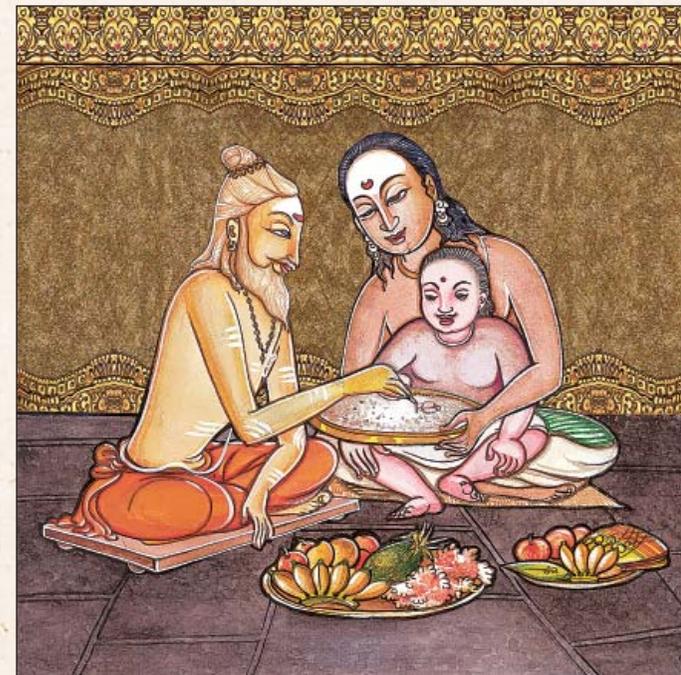
Sri Raj Bai Pandey, *Hindu Samskaras*



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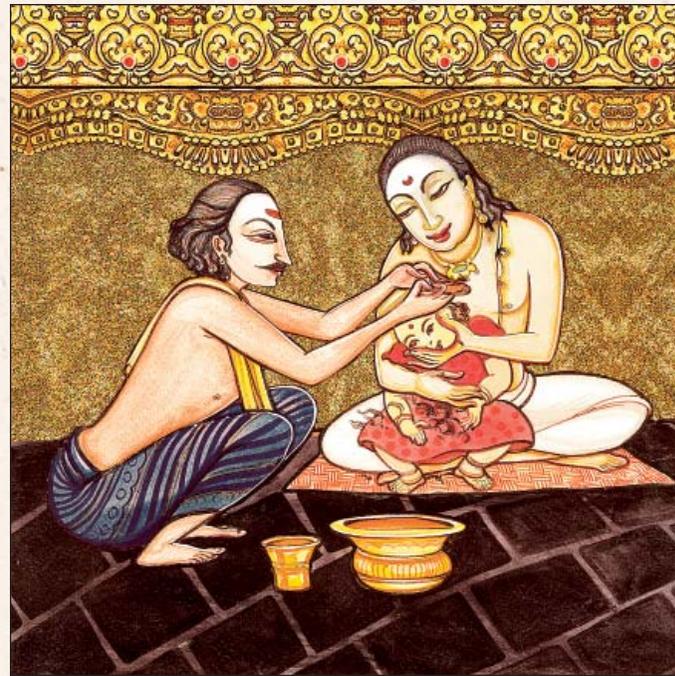
Karnavedha, Ear-Piercing

The ear-piercing ceremony, for both boys and girls, is performed in the temple or the home, generally on the child's first birthday. Health benefits are said to derive from this ceremony.



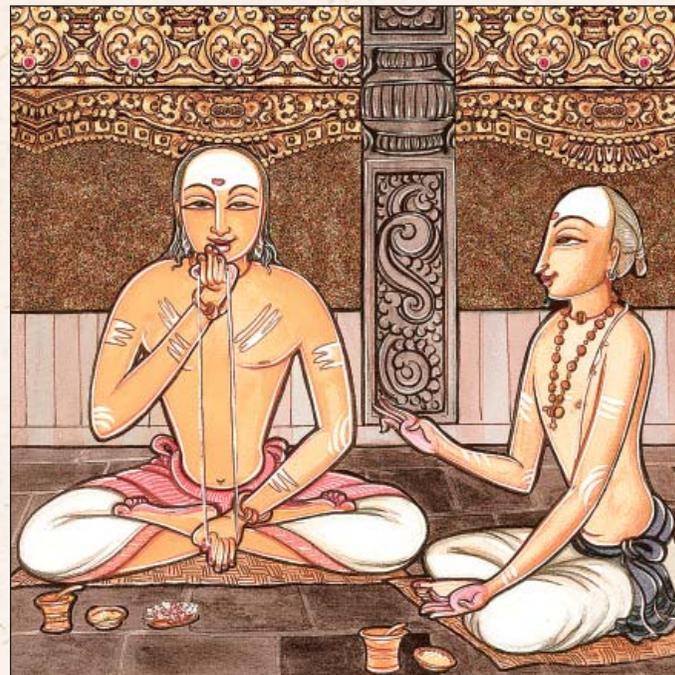
Vidyarambha, Learning Commencement

The official beginning of the child's education is performed in the home or temple, during the fourth year, when he or she writes the first letter of the alphabet in a tray filled with uncooked rice.



Chudakarana, Head-Shaving

Ceremonial head-shaving is usually performed before the end of the third year in the home or temple. The shaven head denotes purity and egolessness and is said to mitigate past life karma.



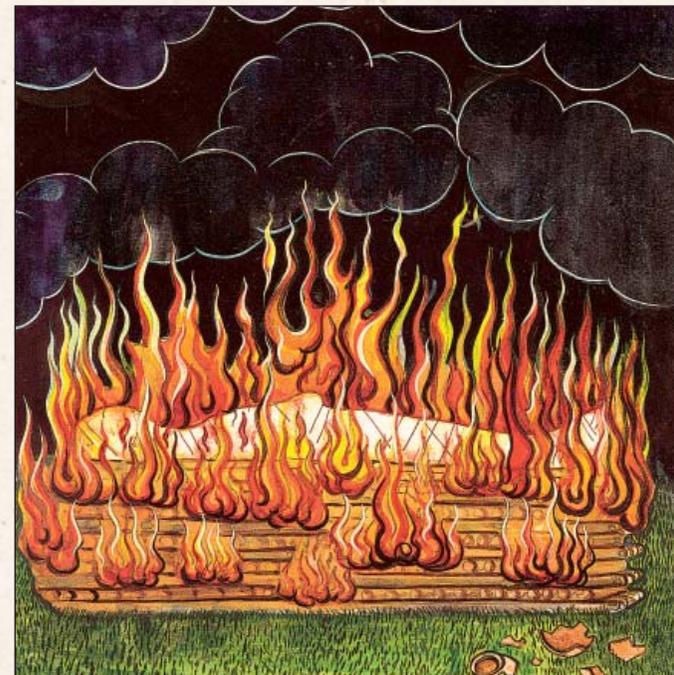
Upanayana, Initiation

The ceremonial presentation of the sacred thread is performed in the temple or home between the ages of 9 and 15, when a boy begins the study of the Vedas. Thereafter, he is considered "twice-born."



Vivaha, Marriage

The marriage ceremony is performed in a temple or special hall around the sacred *homa* fire. Lifetime vows and seven steps before God and the Gods consecrate the holy union of husband and wife.



Antyesti, Funeral

The funeral ceremony is performed or arranged by the relatives according to local traditions. It includes preparation of the body, cremation, rites of mourning, purification and remembrance.

Seven Other Rites of Passage

In addition to the primary personal ceremonies, there is a rich collection of other traditional *samskaras*. Here is a sampling.

Keshanta Kala

When a boy first shaves his facial hair, this indication that he has come of age is celebrated in the temple or at home with the *keshanta* *samskara*. It is a joyous time of gift-giving, yet it is serious as well. Often a vow of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) is taken at this same time.

Ritu Kala

As puberty dawns for a young girl, the *ritu kala* home-ceremony is performed to acknowledge her first menses. New clothing, jewelry and her first sari are given as she joyously and openly joins the young adult community.

Samavartana

This ceremony—literally, "returning home from the house of the guru"—marks the end of studentship and indicates formal closure to the *brahmacharya* period of life. The young person now must choose one of two paths: the *grihastha* path (family life) or the renunciate path (monastic life).

Nishchitartha or Vagdana

This is the betrothal ceremony in which a man and woman are declared formally engaged by their parents with the exchange of jewelry and gifts. Based on this commitment, they and their families begin planning a shared future.

Punsavana

The literal meaning of the term *punsavana* is "the quickening of a male child." Not practiced today, this ceremony was performed by the husband for the wife beseeching the birth of a son, primarily as an assurance for the continuance of the family line.

Simantonmayana

This is the "hair-parting" rite. Not commonly practiced today, this ancient ceremony of parting the hair of the pregnant wife was performed to bring cheer as well as ward off evil spirits.

Jatakarma

During the later days of pregnancy, a woman may have the *jatakarma* *samskara* performed. This rite, based on a verse from the Atharva Veda written specifically to assure safe childbirth, was designed to yield blessings for life as well as protection from harm for both mother and child.