

ॐ CHAPTER SEVEN

Everyday Life

Everyday life among Hindus centers on sixteen steps the scriptures point out as being necessary to attain moksha. These steps are called *samskars*. They are discussed in the first section of this chapter.

Several of the sixteen steps are covered in greater depth in sections of their own. These are marriage and funeral rites. There is also a section dealing with other aspects of everyday life. This section covers such topics as foods, recreation, and the status of women.

Special Ceremonies: Childhood

Samskars are special ceremonies performed during a person's lifetime. Three of these take place before birth.

During the mother's pregnancy, people pray for her health and for the health of the unborn child. They might also pray that the child be a boy.

Although there are sixteen samskars, only devout Hindus of the Brahmin caste experience each one. Most boys usually go through ten, while girls experience about six. Some Hindus experience only three during their lifetime.

The thirteen special ceremonies that take place after the birth of a child can be divided into childhood sacraments and adult rites. Below are those that take place during childhood.

Birth ceremony

A special ceremony is performed on the day of a child's birth. The father dips a gold ring in ghee and honey and applies it to the baby's lips. This is to wish the child a life as "precious as gold." Then the father or a priest whispers into the baby's ear, "May God (Brahman), the creator of all things, grant you wisdom."

Naming the baby

This is the second childhood sacrament or ritual. The choosing of a name for the baby is very important. The right name can mean good luck throughout the child's life. The family asks a priest to consult an almanac and come up with an appropriate name.

In ancient times, boys might be given such names as Mahendravarma or Devagupta. Even today, names connected to the names of gods are popular. These might include Jagdish, Mahesh, and Niranjan. Girls were usually named after certain stars, rivers, or birds. Popular names included Ganga, Yamuna, and

Hindu rituals to promote *moksha*—the release from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth—begin even before a baby is born. Below, an expectant mother recites prayers to ensure the health of her baby.



Maina. Today, common names include those linked to certain goddesses. These names are Ansuya, Parvati, and Savits.

Many Hindus today, however, do not follow such customs. Likely as not, they might name their children after movie or literary heroes. Regardless, the name for a child is often chosen by the eldest woman in the house. Then the father whispers into the child's ears, "Your name is . . ." Afterwards, songs are sung and refreshments served. Those in attendance dine on cooked chick-peas and a special dessert made of fruits, nuts, and sugar.

First outing

The baby is confined to the home for the first five weeks of life. In ancient times, this was to ensure that the child was protected from extreme weather conditions and all infectious diseases. After five weeks, the child is taken to a mandir (temple) to be blessed. It is interesting to note that part of this ritual consists of a dab of soot being applied to the baby's forehead and cheek. This is done to prevent women who have no children from looking at the child with envious eyes.

First solid food

Even the baby eating its first solid food is considered a sacrament or a ritual. This takes place seven or eight months after birth. What the child is given depends on the wealth and status of the parents. In well-to-do Hindu families, a child's first solid food might consist of baby food purchased at a store. In poorer families, the child has to get by with a little boiled rice and milk.

A boy's first haircut

Sometimes a baby girl's hair is cut, but this ceremony is usually reserved for boys. A boy's hair is cut when he is about one year old. The entire head is shaved. Removing all hair is symbolic of erasing the bad karma (actions) from the previous life.

The sacred thread ceremony

The tenth *samskar*, the sacred thread ceremony, is one of the most important for boys. (Until modern times, there was a ninth ceremony in which Brahmin boys had the upper part of their right ear pierced to enable them to wear an ornament. This ceremony has been discontinued.)

The sacred thread ceremony involves



boys of the higher three varnas, or castes. (Look back in Chapter One for a quick review of castes.) It takes place at the age of eight for boys in the Brahmin varna. Boys in the Kshatriya varna go through the ceremony at age eleven, while those who are Vaishyas receive their sacred thread when they are twelve. Neither boys in the lower varna or girls participate in this ritual.

The sacred thread ceremony involves a priest placing a loop of cotton over the left shoulder of a boy. The loop hangs diagonally across his chest and down his right hip. He wears the loop for life. The ceremony is a coming-of-age rite. Afterwards, a boy is considered a man, and

The first haircut is 8th in the 16 steps to moksha. The ceremony is performed between the ages of 1 and 5 prior to which the hair is allowed to grow. Typically performed on boys, the ceremony is not unheard of for girls.

Words to remember:

samskars



his formal religious education begins.

Section Review:

1. What are *samskars*?
2. Who often chooses the name for a newborn child in a Hindu household?
3. Why were Hindu babies originally confined to the home for the first five weeks of their lives?
4. Why is a young boy's head shaved when he is about one year old?
5. What is the significance of the sacred thread ceremony?

Marriage

Four events of an adult's life are considered *samskars*—marriage, the “householder” stage, the retirement stage, and cremation. This section takes a look at how marriages are arranged in Hindu society. It is followed by another section that describes a typical Hindu wedding.

Until recent times, all Hindu marriages were arranged affairs. Partners were chosen by the parents, and the couple never saw one another until the day of the wedding. Sometimes the couple were mere children. Fortunately, the practice of child marriages was outlawed in 1929.

Today, young people are more involved in choosing their own mates. Sometimes they even advertise in the matrimonial columns of newspapers. Even young women, or the parents of young women, place ads in leading newspapers hoping to attract a suitable husband. Some ads state that the prospective bride or bridegroom must be of a certain varna (caste) and complexion. Others point out that varna and complexion do not matter. (Complexion refers to the lightness or darkness of the skin. Some Indian Hindus are light-complected. Others have dark skin.)

Although fictitious, the newspaper ad below is much like those that appear in

some Indian newspapers today.

Bride Wanted

A government official of the Kshatriya varna, age 28, with good job and comfortable apartment, desires bride from a high caste Hindu family. Must be well-educated, with a light complexion. Send photo to Box CD431, c/o The Times of India, Bombay.

Foreigners who work in India also advertise in Indian newspapers for wives. Here is one that might be typical.

Bride Wanted

French importer, age 30, seeks attractive, well-educated Hindu girl as bride. Caste and complexion not important. Send photo to Box FG568, c/o The Hindu, Madras.

In Hindu families where marriages are still arranged, the search for an acceptable partner may go on for months, even years. Parents seeking a husband for their daughter spread the word of her availability among families of similar varna and interests. Details of the girl's age, education, height, weight, complexion, and other factors are given to prospective bridegrooms. If the family of an eligible male shows an interest, the two families agree to meet. If the young man and young woman like each other, the services of a priest are sought. The priest looks at the horoscopes of both partners to be sure they are compatible. Then he decides on the best time to have the wedding.

When the date for the wedding is set, the bride's family pays for the use of a hall or mandir. (Some Hindu marriages, however, are still held in the home of the bride.) They also pay for the feast that follows the wedding. The practice of the bride's family providing a dowry is no longer legal in India. Yet families might make some kind of financial

arrangements before the wedding takes place.

Section Review:

1. How are Hindu betrothals (engagements) different today than in past years?
2. Why does a priest check the horoscope of a prospective bride and groom?

A Hindu Wedding

Most Hindu weddings in India take place between the months of December and July. This is because India's *monsoon* (rainy) season and major festivals occur during the months from August through November.

In addition to renting a large hall or mandir for the wedding, the bride's parents pay for the printing of invitations. Don't be puzzled if you look through a book about Hinduism and see a picture of a wedding invitation that has swastikas printed at the top. If you remember from Chapter Two, the swastika is a sign of good luck among Hindus. Also printed on a typical invitation are pictures of the elephant-headed god Ganesha and a water vessel with a coconut on it and a lamp beside it. These are also symbols of good luck.

For her wedding, the bride wears a new red and gold sari and gold jewelry. The wedding may last from one to six hours, depending on the wishes of the parents. A very important part of the ceremony is a sacred fire called *homa*. The fire is lit in a metal or brick container. As it burns, the groom drops ghee (liquid butter) and grains into the flames. This act on his part symbolizes fertility.

The most important part of the wedding ceremony are the Seven Steps. Together, the bride and groom take seven steps toward the sacred fire. At each step they stop and make promises to each other. As they do so, a piece of cloth hangs loosely around the groom's neck

and is tied to the bride's sari. This symbolizes their being joined together as man and wife.

At the first step toward the sacred fire, the bridegroom stops and asks his bride to take the step for a plentiful supply of food. He also asks her to support him in his endeavors. She replies that she will. Then they take the other six steps. At each of these, the groom says to the bride:

Take the second step for strength.

Take the third step for prosperity.

Take the fourth step for happiness.

Take the fifth step for children. May we be blessed with many sons, and may they live to a ripe old age.

Take the sixth step for the enjoyment



of seasonal pleasures.

Take the seventh step for lifelong friendship.

After the completion of the Seven Steps, the couple stands before the fire and prays to Agni, the Aryan God of Fire. They ask Agni for such qualities as success, understanding, wisdom, riches,



Words to remember:

monsoon
sari
homa
Seven Steps

The most important part of a Hindu wedding is the ritual of the Seven Steps. Together, the bride and groom take seven steps toward the sacred fire. At each step they stop and make promises to each other.



power, good health, and a long life. The priest then sprinkles them with special water and wishes them "peace, prosperity, and contentment."

Section Review:

1. Why do most Hindu weddings take place between December and July?
2. Why are swastikas printed on some Hindu wedding invitations?
3. What is the *homa*?
4. Why does the groom drop ghee and grains into the *homa* fire?
5. What is the significance of the Seven Steps?

Funeral Customs

As with marriage, Hindu practices regarding death and funerals have changed with modern times. For centuries the custom of *suttee* was followed in India.

Suttee requires that a widow throw herself on her husband's funeral *pyre*. The *pyre* was any material that burned easily. It consisted of various kinds of wood, with perhaps ghee (again, liquid butter) poured onto the fire to fan the flames.

The word *suttee* comes from an old Sanskrit word meaning "faithful wife." No one knows for sure how the custom started. At first, it only required that the wife of the deceased lie next to her husband on the *pyre* for a few minutes. But at some point, grieved widows began to purposely burn themselves alongside their husbands. This was especially true with the many wives of kings and other rulers.

Suttee continued in India until 1829. At that time, Indian reformers convinced the ruling British government to outlaw it.

Cremation is still the method of burial for most Hindus. In western countries, cremation takes place at a *crematorium*. There is no funeral *pyre*. The same may hold true in India's largest cities. But in Indian villages, the deceased continue to be cremated on a *pyre*. The *pyre*, if possible, is constructed next to a stream or river. This is because Hindus believe

that the casting of ashes into water reduces the chance of the deceased being born into a new life. You must remember that although the person who dies will be missed, Hindus hope that his or her death is final. They pray that the person attains *moksha* and that the cycle of rebirth is broken.

A Hindu family prepares the deceased for cremation by wrapping the body in a shroud. A *shroud* is a garment in which a dead person is buried or cremated. If the deceased is a woman, she will be clothed in a sari. A garland of flowers is also placed on the body. After a certificate of death is obtained from local authorities, the body is ready to be cremated.

The eldest son is often in charge of the cremation. He walks around the body three times with a lighted torch before setting it afire. After the cremation, a relative helps the son collect the ashes and scatter them over the water.

The relatives of Hindus who die in other countries often arrange for the ashes to be flown back to India to be scattered in the Ganges River. As mentioned earlier, Hindus consider the Ganges the holiest of Indian rivers.

About two weeks after a person dies, his or her family has a feast. This feast is referred to as the *shraddha ceremony*. Rice and milk are made into balls called *pindas*. The serving of the *pindas* is believed to help the dead person's soul acquire a new body for its next life. The *shraddha* ceremony is held each year to honor the deceased.

Section Review:

1. What is *suttee*? Why was it discontinued?
2. Why are funeral *pyres* often built near a river or stream?
3. Why do relatives of Hindus who die in other countries arrange for their ashes to be flown back to India?
4. What is the *shraddha* ceremony?

Words to remember:

pyre
crematorium
shroud
shraddha
ceremony
pindas

Other Aspects of Daily Life

As you have seen, religion dominates the daily lives of Hindus. But there are other aspects of Hindu life that are worthy of note. These deal with the status of women, with diet, and with entertainment.

Women in Hindu society

The progress made by women in India is not unlike that of women in other societies, even the United States. There was a time in America when women could neither vote nor hold jobs. They could not own or inherit property. They were expected to stay home and perform what men considered their "wifely" duties. Even today, women in the western world have not achieved complete equality with men. They still suffer from job discrimination and other forms of inequality.

The same holds true for Hindu women in India and other places. They have made progress and achieved many rights, but they still have a long way to go. But their status is so much better than it was in centuries past. In ancient times, women had very little freedom. When a woman married, she became her husband's property to do with as he saw fit. A woman could neither leave nor divorce her husband. She could not even leave the house without her husband's permission. The husband, of course, had many rights and privileges, and was free to do as he pleased.

In 1955, the Indian parliament passed the Hindu Marriage Act. At long last, the rights of women were addressed. A Hindu wife could file for a divorce on such grounds as cruelty and adultery. She also gained the right to seek alimony, or payments of support from her husband.

Today, many Hindu women have jobs, separate bank accounts, and own land and property. In many households, they hold a position comparable to their husbands. This represents quite a change from the lives their predecessors led for centuries.

Food

Many people think that all Hindus are vegetarians. This is not true. There are Hindus who eat every kind of meat except beef. This, of course, is because of their reverence for the cow. Hindus are so careful in avoiding beef that those who travel by airplane always order a vegetarian plate for fear that the airline's entrée might be beef.



Vegetarianism seems to be associated with caste. Those in the higher castes, especially Brahmins, are more likely to shun meat than those beneath them. They cite many verses from the ancient scriptures to support their beliefs. A few of these are listed below.

He who desires to augment his own flesh by eating the flesh of other creatures lives in misery in whatever species he may take his birth.
Mahabharata 18.115.8

While not all Hindus are vegetarians, even meat-eating Hindus avoid the eating of cows. While the reasons for this are not clear, in the agricultural society of ancient India, the cow was an invaluable source of labor, fresh milk, and fuel in the form of dung. This may account for the cow's divine status.



And when a man sees that the God in himself is the same God in all that is, he hurts himself by hurting others. Bbhagavad Gita 13.27-28

What is the good way? It is the path that reflects on how it may avoid killing any creature. Tirukural 324

Words to remember:

Hindu Marriage Act

Orthodox, or strict, Hindus, also avoid such things as alcohol, spicy foods, garlic, onions, and mushrooms. Furthermore, they might not partake of foods that are red in color and remind one of blood. These foods include beets, carrots, and watermelon.

Recreation

Such events as festivals and village fairs provide entertainment for Hindus of all ages in India and elsewhere. People who can afford it also enjoy such activities as tennis and polo. In cities, towns, and villages, spectator sports include the likes of acrobatics, cricket, and wrestling matches.

Children, especially those of parents who are not wealthy, rely on more traditional games to keep themselves

entertained. Although they play games that are unique among Hindu children, they also engage in activities that are similar to children's games in America. Blind man's bluff, hopscotch, and hide-and-seek are popular, as are marbles and skipping rope. Boys enjoy wrestling and tug-of-war, while girls play a game with dried berries that is similar in some ways to jacks.

Section Review:

1. Briefly describe the status of Hindu women in ancient times.
2. What rights did women in India gain under the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955?
3. Why do Hindus not eat beef?
4. Why do devout Hindus not eat such foods as beets and watermelon?
5. What are some popular spectator sports in India and other places where Hindus live?
6. Name several games Hindu children play that are similar to games played by children in America.

For Further Thought:

1. You read that names given to Hindu children in the past always had a religious connection. The same was true of the names parents gave to children in early America. Make a list of children's names that were once popular in America—names that came directly from the Bible.
2. What childhood ceremonies are important in other religious cultures?
3. Pretend that you lived in India when childhood marriages were the rule. Make a diary entry in which you express your thoughts and feelings about marrying someone you have never seen—and at such an early age.
4. Would you advertise in the newspaper or subscribe to a dating service in order to meet a mate? Explain.
5. What are your feelings about cremation?
6. Write a report expressing your views on vegetarianism.
7. Tell why you believe women in America have or have not achieved equal rights with men.