

Vidyārambha Saṁskāra: A brief analysis

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to study the socio-cultural aspects of vidyārambha saṁskāra and its significant in the present time. As Vidyārambha is not from Vedic time, the origin and development of this saṁskāra as an independent one from Upanayana, the variations, and the essence behind the saṁskāra are discussed in this paper. The saṁskāra was undergoing changes and now-a-days, it is only performed only few in the few places which is not a positive response from the society. But the fact is that although it is not known as vidyārambha in today's society in all over India; it is existing in other forms and with other names as well as in other religion too.

Keywords: vidyārambha, saṁskāra, vedic, humanities

Introduction

Some moments in life are immensely filled with emotion that it's impossible to suppress the tears - whether of joy or of sadness. The birth of a child, first haircut, the first day of the school, the wedding -they are all important events in a person's life. In Hinduism, we celebrate these pivotal events -*saṁskāras* with big interest. As it is well-known to us that there are sixteen mostly followed and renowned *saṁskāras* -the first of which starts with conception (*Garbhādhāna*) and end with death ritual (*Antyeṣṭi*). Together, they mark the stages of a complete human life - a truly beautiful concept.

Saṁskāras have a long and varied past. Many of them go back to an early antiquity and some of them still survive. In course of time they have undergone changes and modifications. The *saṁskāras* are described in some hymns of the Vedas, a few brāhmaṇas, and the *gṛhyasūtras*, the *dharmasūtras*, the *smṛtis* and the later treatises. The saṁskāras were based on religious beliefs and social conditions. The purely natural behaviours and practices of the beginning become more cultural and gradually many social elements entered the grounds of religious ceremonies, many cultural devices were introduced to shape the *saṁskāras* in order to produce the desired effects. The saṁskāras are in fact, expressive and sometimes symbolic performances. They also contain dramatic utterances and theological gestures. The aim of the *saṁskāras* was to secure the welfare of the recipient and to develop his personality. All the rites, ceremonies and customs, that forms the *saṁskāras*, are, more or less, universal. They have all a recognised place in ancient cultures and they are still represented within the limits of religions.

The entire saṁskāras are grouped under the following heads-

1. The Pre-natal Saṁskāras.
2. The Saṁskāras of childhood.
3. The Educational Saṁskāras.
4. The funeral ceremonies.

Vidyārambha, which is one among the educational *saṁskāras* is the subject of attention here. What is this *saṁskāra* mean, its development and how the concept of *vidyārambha* is developed, what are the advantages of this *saṁskāras* and what is the relationship of *vidyārambha* with other *saṁskāras* are the issues those are trying to present here.

The meaning of the word Saṁskāra

No any word in English can convey the correct translation of saṁskāra. Ceremony or Latin 'caerimonia' does not give the full meaning of this word. Rather it corresponds with Sanskrit Karman, religious act in general. Saṁskāra does not mean "more outward religious rite, polite observances, empty forms, stately usages formalities and punctilious behaviour" ^[1] as it is generally understood by some people. A better approach to the interpretation of Saṁskāra in English is made by the word sacrament which means "religious ceremony or act regarded as external and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace". Sacrament also means confirmation of some promise and oath; things of mysterious significance, sacred influence and symbol." ^[2] Thus it overlaps many other religious spheres which, in the Sanskrit literature, are covered by "śuddhi, purification," "prāyaścitta", "atonement"; "vratas", "vows" etc.

The word Saṁskāra consist of 'sam' prefix, *kr* root *ghaṇ* *pratyaya* -suffix. On the other hand, Saṁskāra is derived from the Sanskrit word *saṁskṛhan* and is used in a variety of ways. It is rarely found in the early Vedic literature. But its allied word 'Saṁskṛta' occurs frequently enough. In the R̥gveda (V. 76. 2) it is used in the sense of 'purified' and *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa* uses this term in the sense of preparing or purifying *havis* (offering) for the gods. The Mīmāṃsākās regarded it the ceremonial purification of sacrificial materials. Jaimini used the word in the sense of 'purificatory rite'. The

¹ The Oxford dictionary, under the word, 'Ceremony'

² Ibid. under the word 'Sacrament'.

commentator of Jaiminisūtra, Śābra explain this term as an act which makes a certain thing or person fit for a certain purpose^[3]. The *Tantravaṛtika* (p.1078) regards 'saṃskrāra' as those acts and rites that impart fitness and further adds "fitness is of two kinds." The Advaita Vedāntins^[4] regard it the false attribution of physical action to the soul and the Naiyāyikās use it in self – reproductive quality recognised by the Vaiśeṣikas as one of the twenty four *gunas*. In the classical Sanskrit literature the word saṃskāra is used in the sense of education, cultivation, training^[5], perfection and grammatical purity^[6], polishing^[7] embellishment, ornament^[8], influence^[9], impression on the memory^[10], merit of action etc.

The Meaning of the "vidyārambha" and its Significance

'Vidyārambham' means beginning of study for a child. The child start leaning to write and read Sanskrit alphabets. In this days the other languages and subjects are also included. The other names for vidyārambha^[11] are:

- i) Akṣarārambha.^[12]
- ii) Akṣarsvīkarana.^[13]
- iii) Akṣarlekhaṇa.^[14]
- iv) Akṣarabhyāsam.
- v) Vidyārambham.

Vidyārambham (literally, commencement of studies) is done either when the child attains three or five years. On the tongue of the child the letters "Hari Śri Ganapataye Namaḥ Avighnamastu" and all the alphabets are written with a piece of gold. The child is made to write the same letters from "Hari Sri" onwards with its index finger on raw rice in a bell metal vessel and the child is made to utter each word when it is written. Either the father of the child or an eminent teacher officiates at this ritual.

The Sources of Information and development of Vidyārambha

The *vidyārambha saṃskāra* usually proceeds the *upanayana saṃskāra* in order. The origin of the *vidyārambha saṃskāra* is far posterior to that of the *upanayana Saṃskāra*. No any evidence is there in the *gṛhasūtras*, the *dharmasūtras* and early *smṛtis*. Even they never mention it. Moreover, the mediaeval and modern systems that describe the saṃskāras do not contain it. The

authorities for information about is saṃskāra are few treatise, namely the *vīramitrodaya (Saṃskāraprakāśa, Vol. I, page 321 ff.)*, the *Smṛti Chandrikā (Saṃskārakāṇḍa pages 67 ff.)*, the *Saṃskāra-ratnamālā* of Gopinātha Bhaṭṭa and the commentary of *Aparārka* on the *yajñavalkya-Smṛti*. All these sources are very recent in the history of ritual literature in India and they can be placed subsequent to eleventh century^[15]. Even the original authorities, Viśvāmitra,^[16] Bṛhaspati^[17] and Mārkaṇḍeya^[18] quoted by them cannot be much earlier. As the astronomical details given by the aforeside writers cannot be tracked back anterior to the seventh or eighth century A.D, we can conclude that they flourished after these centuries^[19].

The Cause of the Later Origin of Vidyārambha Saṃskāra

It seems very strange that the *gṛhasūtras* and *dharmasūtras* that deal with even insignificant ceremonies like the first outing and first feeding of a child, ignore the vidyārambha by mistake, which is the sign of the beginning of primary education and was thus a very important occasion in the life of the child. It can be only clarified or justified by the fact or may be assumptions that while many of the saṃskāras originated in the pre-sūtra period, the vidyārambha did not come into existence till very late. Furthermore, Sanskrit was then a spoken language and the upanayana marked the beginning of primary education. Here the point is that the learning of Sanskrit did not require an opening of learning reading and writing. If children began the education with the memorizing of the sacred hymns without any help of writing there was no need to vidyārambha. Moreover, writing was unknown in early times^[20], or at least not used for formal educational purposes. Therefore there was no need of introducing another separate *saṃskāra* besides the *upanayana* for celebrating the learning of alphabets.

Later on, Sanskrit stopped to be the spoken language of people. The literature of the Hindus increased and became complex. The sciences of grammar and exegesis evolved and difficult branches of learning came into existence. The lovers and learners of literature was increasing and it became too unmanageable for memory. Hence to preserve the treasure of learning, alphabets were invented and the art of writing became known. At this time, for studying the Sanskrit literature, a preliminary instruction in reading and writing became necessary. Thus, in course of time the *upanayana* could not mark the beginning of primary education. In its place vidyārambha commenced and upanayana was performed at the

³ संस्कारो नाम स भवति यस्मिज्जाते पदार्थो भवति योग्यः कस्यचिद्व्यस्य ।

⁴ स्नानाचमनादिजयाः संस्कारादेहे उत्पद्यमानापि तदभिमानि जीहे कल्प्यन्ते ।

⁵ निसर्ग संसारविनीत इत्यसौ नृपेण चक्रे युवराज शब्दभाक् । Raghuvamśam V.3.35.

⁶ संस्कारवत्वेव गिरा मनीषी तथा च पूनश्च विभाषिनश्च । Kumārasambhavam, 1.28.

⁷ प्रयुक्तसंस्कार इवाधिकं बभौ । Raghuvamśam, 3. 18. Kumārasambhava, 1.28.

⁸ स्वभावसुन्दरं वस्तु न संस्कारमपेक्षते, the Sakuntala 7.23.

⁹ यन्त्रे भाजते लग्नः संस्कारो नान्यथा भवित् । The Hitopadeśa 1.8.

¹⁰ संस्कारादिजन्यं ज्ञानं स्मृतिः । Tarkasaṃgraha.

¹¹ V.M.S.vol. I. p.321; Viśvāmitra, Ibid.

¹² Gopinath Bhatt: *Sanskara Ratnamala*.

¹³ Vasistha, quoted in V.M.S. vol. I. p. 321.

¹⁴ The Mārkaṇḍeya Pūrāna, Ibid.

¹⁵ Cf. P.V. Kane. *History of Dharmasāstra*, p.440; 343; 328.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 236

¹⁷ Ibid, p.207.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, A.S. Altekar, *Education in ancient India*, p. 2.

²⁰ Buhler (Indian Antiquary, 1904) says that the introduction of alphabets in India was subsequent to 800 B.C, but his opinion has been given up in the light of the Indus valley discoveries, M.M. Rai Bahadur Pandit Gaurī Shankar Hirachand Ojha, in his *prāchīna Lipimāla*, has proved, on literary evidences, that the art of writing was known in India in the later Samhitā period (c. 1600-1200 B.C.). There is however, no evidence, to show that letters were introduced earlier.

commencement of secondary education. So this new vidyārambha *saṃskāra* was needed to celebrate the start of the primary education.

The *smṛtis* are later than the origination of the vidyārambha *saṃskāra*. The reason of making the “Learning of Alphabates” as a *saṃskāra*” was probably, the long time performance of this *saṃskāra* with the *Caula* or *tansure* ceremony ^[21]. This possibility is supported by *Arthaśāstra*, ^[22] according to which the education of a prince began at the time of the *Caula saṃskāra*. In the *Uttara-Rāmacarita* also, the sage Vālmiki started the education of Kuśa and Lava after their tonsure ceremonies, and they had learnt many sciences before they commence their Vedic studies after the upanayana ^[23]. It shows the clear proof of the assumption of *arthaśāstra*.

There was another more factor which facilitated the performance of *vidyārambha* with the *cūḍākarāṇa*. The *chūḍākarāṇa* was performed between the fourth and seventh years of the child. This was the proper time of commencing the primary education too. So, both the *saṃskāras* were combined and performed together. The number of tufts hair to be kept at the time of the tonsure ceremony was determined by the number of celebrated stages (*parvas*) in the family ^[24]. It was a convenient idea that the primary education of the child should commence at the time when its tonsure ceremony was performed.

The time of Performing Vidyārambha Saṃskāra:

The vidyārambha *saṃskāra* was performed in fifth year of the child according to Viśvāmītra ^[25]. It could be performed even in the seventh year according to an anonymous *Smṛti* writer quoted in the *Ṣoḍaśa-Saṃskāravidhi*. There was rule of postponing its time only if there were some unavoidable circumstances but it must be performed some time before the upanayana ceremony. “The wise should begin the learning of Alphabets before the second birth.” ^[26] From the month of *Mārgaśīrṣa* to *Jyeṣṭha* was regarded as the proper time of performance of the vidyārambha *saṃskāra*. The Months from *Āṣāḍa* to *Kārtika*, when Lord Viṣṇu is supposed to be sleeping, were prohibited for this *saṃskāra* ^[27]. Here, one thing is noticeable. During the *sūtra* and the pre-*sūtra* period, the educational session began particularly during the rainy season. But according to the above authority this very season was avoided. Therefore, from the aforesaid sources we lastly found a contradictory view on it.

²¹ Cf. A.S. Altekar, *Education, in ancient India*, p.2.

²² वृत्तचौलकर्म लिपि संख्यानं चोपयुञ्जीत । 1.2; Raghuvamśam. V.3.28.

²³ निवृत्तचौलकर्मणोश्च तयोस्त्रयीवर्जभितरास्त्रिभो विद्याः सावधानेन मनसा परिनिष्ठापिताः । *the uttararāmacarita* Act.II.

²⁴ यथार्थं शिखां निदधाति । A.G.S. xvi. 6; V. G. S. iv.

²⁵ Quoted in the *Vīramitrodāya Saṃskāra Prakāśa*. Vol. I. p. 321.

²⁶ द्वितीयजन्मतः पूर्वमारभेताक्षरान्नुपधीः । Bṛhaspati quoted in the *Vīramitrodāya Saṃskāra Prakāśa*. Vol.I.p.32.

²⁷ अग्रसुप्ते जनार्दने । विश्वामित्रः । Ibid.

आषाढशुक्लद्वादश्यां शयनं कुरुते हरिः ।

निद्रा त्यजति कार्तिकायां तयोः संयुज्यते हरिः । *Vishnudharmottara*, ibid.

The Ceremonies of Vidyārambha Saṃskāra

At first, an auspicious day was fixed for the *saṃskāra*, especially when the Sun was in the northern hemisphere ^[28]. In the beginning of the ceremony the child was required to bathe and to be scented and decorated. Then Vināyaka, Sarasvatī, family goddess and Bṛhaspati were worshipped. Nārāyana and Lakṣmi were also propitiated and one’s own Veda and Sūtrakāras of one’s own Vedic school were paid respect. After this the Homa is offered. The teacher, facing towards the east, performed the Akṣarārambha of the child who facing towards the west. Saffron and other substances scattered on a silver slat and letters were written in a gold pen. But organising such expensive things like a silver plank and a gold pen is possible only for the rich. So, the other process is that the letters can be written on rice with any pen which is specially made for this occasion. The following phrases. i.e. ‘Salutation to Gaṇeśa, salutation to Sarasvatī, salutation of family gods and goddesses and salutation of Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī.’ Are written. After this “Om namah Sidhyāya or salutation to siddha” ^[29]. Then the child worshipped teacher, and the latter made the child read trice what was written. Having read, the child presented clothes and ornaments to the teacher and made three circumambulation round the gods. The Brahmans were entertained and propitiated with sacrificial fee. In return, they blessed the child. The ladies whose husbands and children were alive, waved lamps. In the end the teacher was presented a turban. The ceremonies closed with the dismissal of gods to their respective places ^[30]

‘Vidyārambha’ according to some other writer

Vidyārambham - (literally, commencement of studies) is done either when the child attains three or five years. On the tongue of the child the letters “*Hari Śri Ganapataye Namaḥ Avighnamastu*” and all the alphabets are written with a piece of gold. The child is made to write the same letters from “*Hari Śri*” onwards with its index finger on raw rice in a bell metal vessel and the child is made to utter each word when it is written. Either the father of the child or an eminent teacher officiates at this ritual.

Vidyārambha in Present Scenario

“*Reading make a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man*” ^[31]

Reading, undoubtedly increases any individual’s knowledge, depth and intensity and later it influences on the person’s way of thought and personality. So, young kids of three-four years age are familiarized to “Vidyārambham” even before the age when they have hardly any idea about books and reading.

Vidyārambham in South India

“Vidyārambham” tradition is observed on *vijayādashami* day mainly in *Kerala* and *Karnātaka*, where children are formally introduced to learning of music, dance,

²⁸ उगते भास्वति Vasiṣṭha ibid.

²⁹ It indicates the Jain influence on the Hindu *saṃskāras*.

³⁰ The description of the ceremonies. See the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* and the *Ṣoḍaśa-Saṃskāravidhi* by Pandit Bhimasena Śarmā.

³¹ Quotation by Sir Francis Bacon.

languages and other folk arts. It involves a ceremony of initiation into the characters of the syllable.

Navarathri is essentially celebrated in Kerala as *vidyārambham*. *Vidyārambham* which is the instigation of children into the world of knowledge is done on the day of Vijayādaśami (last day of *navarātri*). This day is celebrated across the country in two ways. One part of the country treat this as the day of Rāma’s victory against Rāvana or the other people as the day when Goddess Dūrgā defeated Mahiṣāsura; The day when good finally triumphed over the bad. These different stories in different parts of our diverse country can only be the best representative with the underlying message of the good vanquishing the evil.

In the earlier days *vidyārambham* was generally occurred in homes, but now-a-days the home is replaced by temple and mostly the temples where *goddess Saraswati*, who represents knowledge and wisdom, reigns supreme. It was the *Karnavār* (the head of the family) in the home place who holding the young one’s right index finger directed by the little finger, to write “*Om Hari Śri ganapataye namaḥ*” followed by alphabets in mother tongue, over handful of rice placed in a large plate. The same mantra was written on the tongue of the youngster with a gold ring. The rice was then converted into sweet *pāyasam* and everybody enjoyed the same with relish. In the case of temple the *Karnavār’s* role is taken over by the temple priest who after a few more additions to the traditional role performed by the *Karnavār* is given a handsome *dakṣina*.

The belief in both the cases is that the child is now entitled to read and write and ready to enter the world of letters and the physical world where supposedly knowledge is supreme and knowledge brings prosperity. This tradition is followed assiduously even by all the elders year after year. While it was a Hindu ritual earlier today it is practiced by all the religions [32].

A Few images of vidyārambha Saṁskāra in South India: [33]



Vidyārambha in other Religion

After having written the salutation to *Gaṇeśa*, *Sarasvati*, family goods and goddesses, *Nārāyaṇa* and *Lakṣmī* in *vidyārambha Saṁskāra*, “*Om Namah Siddhāya* or salutation to *Siddhā* was written and it indicates the Jain influence in *Hindu Saṁskāras* [34].

Rajwali Pandey mentions in his book “*Hindu Saṁskāras*” that “*the ceremony associated with the learning of Alphabets was performed by the Mohammadans also. We are informed that Humāyuna, the Mughal emperor, was admitted into a Maktab when he was four years, four months and four days old, and the occasion was solemnized with due ceremonies (Tazkiratul Sacatin, Ms. In Boh. Coll.vol. I. p. 169; Shah-i-Jahan Nāmah, Ms. in ASP. P.45)* [35].

Conclusion

Today’s world have appeared as a global village. The high technology and communications converts the world

³² Internet Source-http://creative.sulekha.com/vidyarambham_609983_blog

³³ Images are collected from internet sources.

³⁴ *Hindu Saṁskāras* by Rajwali Pandey, p.109.

³⁵ *Hindu Saṁskāras* by Rajwali Pandey, p.110

in a small town. But it is not as much good and fruitful as finding internal peace which the *Samśkāras* was to some extent able to find out. Human beings are becoming very comfort seeking Beings. But our comforts lead us to unavoidable psycho-physical imbalanced. It seems that the peace is no more exist in the dictionary of mind of Human race. Families are broken. Divorce cases are uncountable. Somewhere, we have lost our Identity and we do not know for what we are hunkering after. The blind imitation of Western culture too breaks our society. We cannot follow their culture positively. We are receiving the negative side more whereas in the West, the Pop (Francis) of the Vatican City (Rome) believes in our *samśkāras*. He viewed that the *samśkāras* can save the broken families in the west. It will make him to understand the value of a Family. The pop is talking to analyse the *samśkāras* in a scientific way and to give it to the people and to apply them. Our *samśkāras* comprises a very good sense of togetherness and the techniques of a natural and healthy life through which we can find our Rhythm in life and then happiness. If we talk about *vidyārambha samśkāras*, it is a good and auspicious beginning of life where a child commences 'learning Alphabets' 'arts' etc. in the presence of Guru, family members and with all the blessings of well-wishers'.

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