

# Superiority and Social Injustice in U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samaskara*

Muneer Ahmad Wani

Ex. M.phil Scholar

Deptt. Of English LPU

“Poor wanderer, “Said the Leaden sky” I fain would lighten thee,  
But there be laws in force on high which say it must not be.” (Thomas Hardy)

## Abstract

Indian social and cultural life has two important aspects: religion and caste. Attempts have been done by many critics and researchers of caste and religion to prove barrier is created, both socially and religiously, in the life of Indian people, as casteism has been attributed to Hinduism. Caste system is such blight on Indian society which mars all our claims to reign over the world in 21st century. This system simply exploits the low caste people and women in numerous ways in the name of so called socio-cultural and religious establishments. How higher and elite class exploit the down trodden class religiously, socially as well as economically will be the aim of this paper.

**Keywords:** Brahmanism, Caste System, Superiority, Exploitation, Upper caste, Low caste, Shudras

## Introduction:

In the Indian History hierarchy of caste has been an important issue related with hegemony, and power dynamics. Over the years social hierarchy have manoeuvred to gain and retain the supremacy of social domain by using and appropriating, theories, discourses, sources of knowledge, and ideologies, which have been the effectively and primarily responsible for the marginalization of the people especially belonging to category of powerless and low caste. But it has been well said “every dog has a day” from past few decades on the one hand, there has been rise in the discourse of marginalised people be it Dalits, women or downtrodden tribes, on the other hand these groups like Dalits and marginalised women not only contesting the domination and supremacy of higher class but also giving and offering the counter discourse and canon. We are claiming to reign the whole world in this 21<sup>st</sup> century but Caste system is a disease, blight, hindrance and what not which mars all our claims. By so called establishments: religious or socio-cultural, this system is exploiting women and low castes in numerous ways from not only decades but from centuries. Murthy is much successful in portraying the voice of abused and downtrodden people by using his literary apparatus be it satire, humour or irony.

U.R. Anantha Murthy, one among those brilliant novelist who won the worldwide fame, his novel *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), originally written in Kannada, translated by A.K Ramanujan into English, has led its author to the presidency of the Sahitya Academi. Ananthamurthy, representative of the ‘Navya’ movement, is recognised as an iconic and important writer in India as well as in abroad. In his works he examines well the themes like caste system, traditions, religion, changing values with the changing world and cultural value system. He has finely depicted the elements of socio-culture crystal clearly. The notable event in his life is that although born in Brahman family but he never accepted their rites and rituals, he was always against them. Caste system, religion, rules, culture, tradition, rituals and rites were the basic and fundamental issues to discuss in his works. The important issue discussed by him is untouchability: a complex, mythical caste system. With the mystery of present and past he also depicts and portrays the tale of passion, mystery, spiritual exploration very artistically. Besides there are so many important social issues he has depicted: zealotry towards the turbulence, contradictions, tensions and contemporary social disorders.

His *Samskara*, a modern classic, holds mirror to social evils: casteism, disintegration of Hinduism and untouchability. The novel presents, in a Brahmin agharhara, a trajectory of crisis, be it religious or cultural. The modern and proclaimed writer V. S. Naipaul, aptly described Anantmurthy's portrayal of Hindu society in his controversial book, *India: A wounded Civilization* (1977) as, “Anantamurti has portrayed a barbaric civilization, where the books, the laws, are buttressed by magic, and where a too elaborate social organization is unquicken by intellect or creativity (except to the self in its climb to salvation).” (109) If, *Samaskara*,

on the one hand is a novel depicting best examples of caste system, class conflict, performance of tradition and lust for physical relations, it on the other hand presents the complexity of human relations. The most important character in the novel Pranesacharya represents the caste and class conflict, moreover presents the performance of rituals in each and every activity of the life, giving the solution on cremation and its performance. As portrayed in the novel it was the upper class who ruled and governed Bhartipura, they did not allow the lower class people to do the same and were not permitted to enter the premises of temple.

The Novel is a big trouble to traditionalists who don't like the spectacle of mercenary Brahmins, despite novels renown, leftists are also troubled as the book fails to politicise and historicise its issues; feminists are troubled, who are frustrated by the absence of any women except withered effects and sexy shakuntalas; no doubt, the list, could go on, as the translator quotes in the afterword that the novel is "a movement, not a closure" in any traditional sense of the term (147). We don't have an easy answer to a straightforward question; we end, instead, with a protagonist who is on the road, "anxious, expectant" (138). Proceeding further and analysing the novel's main idea, pollution and purity is the only thing which flows in the whole novel. In life every aspect major role is played by caste system. Brahmins of the novel consider themselves superior: socially and religiously. They control the low castes and consider them weak, downtrodden and useless fellows of society. In the novel Chandri, Belli and Padmavati, stamped as prostitutes, are considered as the property of male Brahmins. Other than Brahmins nobody is allowed to enter the premises of temple, considering others as dirt and filthy.

*Samskara*, a narrative of Indian Brahmins, specifically of sixties and precisely of all times. Sensitive issues: rituals, *samskara*, untouchability, sexual relations, voracity, lust and inhuman attitude etc are perfectly raised in the novel. To develop a right attitude, the novel convinces the readers to comprehend the socio-cultural crisis of Indian society. Title of the novel is very suggestive and it means as Maheshwari states: "Samskara means religious purificatory rites and ceremonies for sanctifying the body, mind and intellect of an individual so that he may become a full-fledged member of the community" (16). The novel raises the question on the Brahmins whether they are really civilized and enlightened enough to understand the meaning of being a Brahmins. The shifting of Pranesacharya to pragmatic realism from orthodox ritualism is interesting to see the process of *samskara* or purification. On completing study from Varanasi he returned with the title of "Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning". He gets entitled with Guru not only in Durvasapura but in all the adjacent villages. The Madva Brahmins of Durvasapura, except the guru Pranesacharya, are narrow minded and selfish. The beginning of the novel deconstructs the idea of self made Brahmanism of the novel as the Naranappa, a Brahmin violates the law of Brahmanism, as he has on one hand great faith with the lower castes and on the other hand had taking a low caste woman Chandri for his concubine. He derides his so called Brahmanhood by breaking all the shackles when he brings his home a prostitute, Chandri. He not only consumes wine or invite Muslims to home, but also eats meat, corrupts other youth by changing their way of life from one angle to another, so he is a true rebel against the Brahmanism.

Expressed in the first epigraph, *Samskara's* worldview is confined in socio cultural binaries. The world of *Samskara* is characterized by its hierarchical structure that stretches from head of Brahmin to limbs of Shudra following by Varna Dharma analogy of Brahmanic Hinduism. *Samskara* is a Brahmanic hegemonic text as gaps and silences represent the real majority of the people. The patriarchal and hierarchal core of Brahmanic world view is reflected in the character of protagonist, Pranesacharya, high priest of Brahmanism in the Agrahara. For the sake of maintaining bogus purity, in the novel, Brahmins practice untouchability, avoiding conversation and touch with the lower class and dalits. Initially, shown in the novel, how Pranesacharya was much worried about his purity, when she came to his house to inform him about the sad demise of Narayanappa, "Chandri was Naranappa's concubine. If the Acharya talked to her, he would be polluted; he would have to bathe again before his meal." (4)

In the novel, women and outcastes are obviously the lost folk who are denied the basic rights: equality, expression, public action and the last rites. They are denied right to speak in front of men and public. The devotion of Acharya towards his bed-ridden wife too falls prey of this problematic. As he washes her body he washes himself to remove the pollution from talking to the Shudra woman, Chandri (1-2). According to Brahmins hollow perceptions they think it is not only the low castes who make them dirty but women of "superior birth" too are polluting them. During periods their own caste women is pollution for them, but Brahmins are deemed to be eternally pure. If the woman of a Brahmin is polluting them, what to say about the outcastes and their women. Their body and labour are consumable under the cover of darkness and in disguise. For instance, the experience of Brahmins at night with Belli and Chandri; the story invoked within the text of Sankara's disguise for safe sex: "Sankara your great founder in his hunger for full experience exchanged his body for a dead king's and enjoyed himself with the queen, didn't he?" (6-7). The above quote is the example of double standards of Brahmanism towards women. "Chandri was Naranappa's concubine. If Acharya talked to her he would be polluted; he would have to bathe again before his meal" (2). Subaltern is always blamed: 'This whore, she is seducing witch! [...I if she had not given him potions why should he push aside his own kinswoman and throw all the ancestral gold and jewels on the

neck of this evil witch' (7) So, in the eyes of a Brahman a low caste woman is a whore. She is targeted for being seductive towards male. Their seductiveness is blamed and cursed while the real villain -patriarchal Brahmanism – goes undetected. A Brahmanic woman considers subaltern women as degraded and useless creatures for polluting "BrahMen," by assuming a cultural and moral policing position, it is interesting to note the Brahman's own view of the low caste-women:

"For the first time his connoisseur eyes had the chance to appraise this precious object which did not normally stir out of the house, this choice object that Naranappa had brought from Kundapura. A real "sharp " type exactly as described in Vatsyayana's manual of love- look at her, toes longer than the big toe, just as the love manual says, look at those breasts. In sex she is the type who sucks the male dry. Her eyes which should be fickle are now misty with grief and fear, but she looks good that way. Like Matsyagandhi the fisher woman in the Ravivarma print hung up in Durgabhatta's bedroom, shyly trying to hide her breasts bursting through her poor rag of a sari. The same eyes and nose: no wonder Naranappa threw away the worship stone for her ate taboo meat and drank taboo liquor. One wonders at his daring. One remembers Jagannatha the Brahmin poet who married the Muslim girl, and his verses about the alien's breasts. If Praneshacharya were not present, if Naranappa wasn't lying dead right there, he would have happily quoted the stanza and expanded on it even to these barren Brahmins. 'To the lustful'- that is Naranappa and his like- 'there is no fear, no shame' as the saying-goes.(8-9)

Subaltern women thus became the choice of Brahmins both for sex and for work. Brahman is at the upper hand having authority at the all he surveys: be it the land or the living bodies that are created for his service by god! Here the problem receives a crystal clear focus that a Brahman can have sex with a subaltern woman but cannot talk to her: "Belli was alright for sleeping with; she was no good for talk. If she opens her mouth, she talks only ghosts and demons" (41). So the bodies are useful but not the brains and tongues. The extend of Brahmanic brutality leads subaltern people to stand self-cursedly at the lords' doorsteps for scraps of rotten food: Chinni begged standing at a distance: please awa throw amorsel for my mouth, awa. Sitadevi went in, brought out some betel leaf, threw them at her. Chinni tucking away the betel in her lap said. (58) Actions like lifting the excreta and cleaning the toilet of Brahmins made the life of low castes like wretched of the earth and to be passive towards the fate and the Brahmanic hegemony. They silently adhere the cruel and bogus rules of elite class and have restricted their life under the evil cloud of upper castes. People who claim themselves as superior, powerful, intelligent, are nothing but in reality are poor minded classes, who are sickened by the disease of superiority complex.

Ananthamurthy artistically uses Narayanappa as spokesperson for his work as a missionary to so that he point out and eradicate religious orthodoxy. Personally, Ananthmurthy, was very famous as an attacker towards the extremism of religion of rightwing political parties in India. It can be seen in the novel how much concerned he was about these issues taking example of religious degeneration. In the novel writes portrays. Rebelling against the Brahmin authority he exposes their evil side of caste-conscious Brahmins, a direct threat to their existence. Although he was threatened by draconian excommunication, when he was alive, he still challenged the conservative agrahara Brahmins: "Try and excommunicate me now. I'll become a Muslim, I'll get you all tied to pillars and cram cow's flesh into your mouths and see to it personally that your sacred Brahmanism is ground into the mud."(12)

Anantha Murthy has ended up with the naked truth that women are exploited and marginalised be it low caste or upper caste. Women in *Samskara* have no powers to voice their feelings. They are mere machines to produce children and do their house chorus. Males dominate financially, equipped with freedom to keep illicit relations. Society has become an insecure place for women because of man's lust. Mr Ishar Singh has rightly said "Evil emanates from Man's nature. God is not a source of evil. Satan's existence is not denied but that is a power created by God to test a man. Man's will is the only source of evil. Man encounters in his mind seven social sins of sensuality, dishonesty, intemperance, anger, talkativeness, malice and illness and he is required by Judaic Law to avoid these sins (78)

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