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Contagion and Behavioural Changes in U. R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*

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Abstract: This article aims to discuss contagion as a wound that exists in both the inner world and outer world of U.R. Anantha Murthy's novella *Samskara*. After the death of Naranappa, the peaceful Brahmin community of Durvasapura witnessed the plague epidemic. Unknowing the fact that their village had been affected by the epidemic, the brahmins assembled to carry out the death rite of Naranappa. However, they act as a group and react to the event without prior cooperation or planning. Additionally, they have changed their conduct in a particularly unreasonable way. Interestingly, though, few Brahmins exhibited selfish behaviour, despite the fact that they were going through a crisis. Their behaviour can be seen as a result of contagion. Hence, the disease is an external manifestation of their participation with infection, and their internal contagion is created by their greed and lust.

Index Terms: Behaviour, contagion, death, epidemic, norm theory.

Published in 1965 and subsequently translated into English by A K Ramanujan, U R Anantha Murthy's Kannada novella *Samskara* is a story about 'the trouble with prioritizing tradition over compassion' (Melissa Beck, *Asymptote Journal*). Set in the background of the bubonic plague, the story unveils the death of heretic Naranappa in the Brahmin community of Durvasapura which was led by Praneshacharya. He was informed of the death of Naranappa by Chandri. The news of the death spread like fire and everyone in the community was shocked after hearing the news. Later, because Naranappa had no children, a few brahmins from the community requested Praneshacharya for a solution about who would perform the death rite of Naranappa. To hear the verdict from Praneshacharya, they gathered together at his verandah. Despite being related to Naranappa, Garudacharya and Lakshmanacharya declined to carry out the funeral rite. When he was alive, Naranappa opposed the brahmin society of Durvasapura; he was charged with conducting an anti-brahminical life; he had ties with individuals of lower social classes; he corrupted young people; he drank wine; he separated from his wife; and he kept a low-caste concubine. He openly disobeyed brahminical customs and traditions, to put it briefly. But quite interestingly, the brahmin community who had previously considered expelling Naranappa, succumbed to his dead body when he passed away.

This article is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the brahmin community and its association with the contagious plague epidemic which can be seen as the cause of their behavioural changes. And the second part analyses the moral standards of the brahmin community in the middle of a crisis. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, contagion is 'something bad that spread quickly by being passed from person to person' and another definition from the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, is 'the spread of a behaviour pattern, attitude, or emotion from person to person or group to group through conscious or unconscious imitation.' Furthermore, the term can also signify 'harmful, corrupting influence' and 'the tendency to spread, as of a doctrine, influence, or emotional state.' In addition to medical usage, the term 'contagion' has undergone several alterations depending on the

context. Based on Christian Borch's observation, Delaurenti and LeRoux in their introduction to *Cultures of Contagion* (2021), suggest that the term 'is often used metaphorically, to describe a wide range of phenomena entailing imitation, transmission, or suggestion, from the exercise of power to interpersonal exchange, and from social groups to subjectivity.' Also, the term used in modern medical science to describe the transmission of a pathogen from one infected person to a non-infected person that harms the physical organism. Additionally, the term often seems to blur the boundaries not only between metaphorical and literal but also between physical and spiritual.

Additionally, French polymath Gustave Le Bon also noted that contagious behaviour has a hypnotic effect on people, adding that 'in a crowd, every sentiment and act is contagious and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest.' Building on Turner & Killian's observation that emergent norm theory 'suggests that crowds come together because a crisis occurs that forces people to abandon prior conceptions of appropriate behaviour and find new ways of acting,' in this novel, after the death of Naranappa, the brahmin community of Durvasapura came together to fulfil the death rite of Naranappa. But interestingly, no one except Chandri did give proper attention (the act of cremation would be done as soon as possible) to the dead body, they were engaged in finding out the cremation rites described in ancient customs. They simply left the dead body of Naranappa in his home, and as a result, the corpse deteriorated and eventually triggered a plague epidemic among the brahmin community. The story employs the plague pandemic as its backdrop, but the word 'plague' does not appear until much later in the text. But there are such incidents that forebode its predicament. From the beginning, Praneshacharya was informed by Chandri that, after his return from Shivamogge, Naranappa had a fever. Later, hearing from Dasacharya about Naranappa having 'Just four days of fever-he also had a swelling', Manjappa closed his eyes and dared not to utter the word epidemic. Unlike the other members of the community, Manjappa has a

...very practical brain, [his] decisions were well-formed already: one, to tell the municipality and get the dead body [of Naranappa] removed; two, to call in doctors and get everybody inoculated; three, to get rat exterminators and pumps, fill the rat holes with poison gas and stop them up; four, if necessary to evacuate people from the Agrahara. (*Samskara*: 104)

Afterward, Shripati was informed that Pilla and his wife had passed away and the villagers had fired up their cottage while leaving the remains inside. The Emergent Norm Theory claims that the reason why 'crowds come together' is because of a crisis that compels people to put aside their preconceived notions of proper behaviour and adopt new ones. In the novella, Belli had no idea that the village was experiencing a plague epidemic; instead, she believed it to be the work of a demon or 'some kind of fever'. As a result, the residents of Belli's community burned Pilla's hut because they were unaware that the village was experiencing a plague epidemic.

Cynthia J. Davis in her article 'Contagion as Metaphor'(2002) opines that "contagion has a peculiar ability to be both content and method, 'both disease and the process of its spread'." In U R Anantha Murthy's novel *Samskara*, contagion is present as a wound and is present both in the outer world and in the inner world of the brahmin Agrahara community of Durvasapura. As a heretic who started the outbreak (both physically and mentally) while still living, Naranappa is said to have brought the disease to Agrahara when he passed away. Sitadevi, the wife of Garuda, had abstained from food and drink while lamenting for her son who had been 'ruined by that scoundrel Naranappa'. Again, Shripati, son-in-law Lakshmana, had been misled and perverted by Naranappa. But, interestingly Naranappa accused Praneshacharya had destroyed Brahminism. During a conversation with Praneshacharya, Naranappa ruminates his life. He explained how Praneshacharya's sensitive recital of Shakuntala, the protagonist of Kalidasa, in some detail served as an inspiration for him. And the way his emotions were stirred by those sensual lines; he felt 'a fire burn in his loins' (*Samskara*: 27). Being a hedonist who wants to live life to its fullest potential, Naranappa advised Pranesh to 'Push those sickly wives of yours into the river.' This can be considered an example of moral contagion. The capacity, ethics, and morality of the Durvasapura brahmin community in addressing the pandemic raised serious doubts considering that they had never experienced such a crisis. When Praneshacharya did not return last night, the Brahmins found themselves in a very terrible situation; it is as if 'the protecting god had left them to their own devices' (*Samskara*: 74). Without Praneshacharya, they became helpless; and from the beginning, he has been referred to as 'the Crest-Jewel of Vedanta Philosophy'; and, his reputation earned him a judge-like figure. When the crisis hit the community, people sought help from Praneshacharya. To fulfill the death rite of Naranappa as soon as possible, brahmins like Garuda

and Dasacharya requested Pranasha to find a way. They insisted that there must be a special rule for an emergency. Again, in crisis, they were blaming each other. Moreover, they behaved irrationally. After

...leaving the monastery in disappointment, Garudacharya, Lakshmanacharya and others came to the Agrahara... In front of everyone, Lakshmanacharya abused Garuda for preventing Naranappa's funeral rites. But no one cared, this was no one cared, this was no time for abuse, it was better to hurry and finish the rites and offer to God the whole property as penalty. (*Samskara*: 104-105).

Afterward, Belli's people also acted unreasonably. Those people 'sacrificed a cock to the demon and vowed they would sacrifice a sheep at the next new moon' (*Samskara*: 106). (paraphrase) Moreover, people from Belli's clan imitated the actions without having so much knowledge of the circumstances. Though they firmly believed these were the activity of demonic interventions, they didn't hesitate to take action without any proper understanding of their situations. They imitated the actions of others. Referring to Paul Jolly, Peta Mitchell in *Contagious Metaphor* argues that "imitation is a 'true contagion' and a conceptual counterpart to physical contagion." (Mitchell: 69) Therefore, their imitation of action can be seen as an example of contagion.

In *Samskara*, the lower class community sees the epidemic 'as a sign of demonic visitation, which only the shaman can decipher or exorcise.' (Das: 42) In Belli's view, Pilla and his wife were 'struck by a demon or something' (*Samskara*: 40), and Chandri's parents are 'trodden all over by the Demon' (*Samskara*: 58). The Brahmins believe that 'these disasters were due to Naranappa's untimely death and [their] declaration of duty in not performing his funeral rites' (*Samskara*: 103). Manjayya, who had an understanding of the epidemic, was disturbed by the series of death; first, Naranappa, then Dasacharya, and then Praneshacharya's wife. All these events are indicating an epidemic, but Manjayya was fearful from the inside and does not dare to name the dreaded disease. Further, Cynthia J. Davis argues that 'contagion has offered itself as a compelling analogy or metaphorical shortcut for explaining processes of cultural as well as disease transmission.' For the Brahmins, the succession of deaths, the rats, and the vultures created a sign of collective pollution (Das: 42). Moreover, the situation becomes terrible to live in; 'There was not a breath of wind; the stench stood stagnant in each house, and like a bodiless ghost it troubled everyone – wretched already with heat, hunger, and dread ... as if nothing in lives to come would wash the filth of their day.' (*Samskara*: 61) The Brahmin women Sitadevi and Anasuya were begging tearfully to their husbands and said that they didn't need other people's property, requesting to take out the body; fulfill the rites. They thought that it is Naranappa's spirit calling out to these vultures. In her seminal work *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag opines that "metaphors tend to 'mythicize' disease by connecting the physical to the moral and by figuring illness as a mysterious and malevolent 'predator'." It is interesting to note that, in the Agrahara, the community members are ignorant of Naranappa's death due to the plague. Therefore, Naranappa's death here is not observed as 'scientifically knowable' (G. Jayagopalan: 143) but instead, it raises a question about religious sanctity. Thus, his death draws a discursive terrain of prejudice and irrationality on the one hand and contagion and biomedical discourse on the other. The narrator explains:

The news of his death spread like a fire to the other ten houses of the Agrahara. Doors and windows were shut, with children inside. By god's grace, no Brahmin had yet eaten. Not a human soul there felt a pang at Naranappa's death, not even women and children. Still in everyone's heart, an obscure fear, an unclean anxiety. Alive, Naranappa was an enemy; dead, a preventer of meals; as a corpse, a problem, a nuisance. (*Samskara*: 3)

The Brahmin community is concerned about the risk of contagion due to Naranappa's violation of norms, which may now consider an entire Agrahara tarnished. The Durvasapura Brahmin community is facing the peril of potential self-contagion. Naranappa was defying Brahminical norms for instance, he, 'drank liquor and ate meat, who threw the holy stone into the river'; all these incidents questioned his Brahminhood '...is he a Brahmin or is he not?' Therefore, it is very clear that the Brahmin community is facing the anxiety of losing their Brahminhood not only within the Agrahara but also in the other neighbouring Brahmin settlement: 'Tell me, which of us is willing to lose his Brahminhood here?' (*Samskara*:19). Moreover, the Agrahara seem to be unfamiliar with the possible contamination of their bodily selves due to a possibly devastating epidemic on the verge of the Agrahara 'and the heightened sense of awareness about one's own mortality that death is likely to bring' (Jayagopalan: 144).

In *Samskara*, there are two levels of contagion: on one level, it leads to the annihilation of bodily disease carried on by Naranappa's death and subsequently the fear of an impending plague epidemic through contagion (again by the contaminated dead body of

Naranappa); and, on the other, the extinction of Brahminhood through their contagious thinking; which can be interpreted as the consequence of social contagion. The issue of how unfavourable thoughts and feeling propagate across a group of people is one that social psychologists and social theorists are working to address. Therefore, contagion is the cause of this spread of unfavourable thoughts and feelings. Le Bon asserts that '[i]deas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes.' Additionally, he believes that in a crowd 'every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest.' Le Bon's theory is illustrated in the novel when, following Durgabhatta's condemnation, Garuda declared he had no objections; 'let's set aside the problem of the gold and jewellery,' he said, adding that 'let's first get the dead body to the cremation ground.' This decision served to counteract Le Bon's theory. (*Samskara*: 53) Garuda has the predisposition to sacrifice personal interests for the good of the community, and this inclination is so strongly influenced by examples rather than arguments that it even allows for the spread of contagious imitation from one person to another. If the rites are not performed properly, the brahmins are terrified that Naranappa will inevitably transform into a brahmin-demon and terrify the Agrahara. This dread opens the door to widespread contagious imitation, where an individual like Garuda is willing to sacrifice his interests for the benefit of the majority.

In his book *Samskara*, Anantha Murthy paints an image of the 'strait-laced village brahmins' who are avaricious, cruel, and gluttons who adore riches and betray orphans and widows. More contagious than their plain appetites and basic requirements is their thirst for wishes and their aspiration for luxury. However, their optimism is undeniably contagious when they sense that the Agrahara is about to contract a disease. Together, they abandoned their individual interests and hopes of ending the problem.

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