

Religious and cultural conflict with modernity: The Analysis of samskara by U. R. Ananthamurthy

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Abstract: In India, there are many religion and cultures, people lived in different cultures and religion. Their living style is different especially people give more importance for their caste and culture system. The caste system of Hindu religion, which has been supported by religious texts like Bhagwatgeeta, Rig-Veda and Manusmriti etc, has been immense influence on the lives of Indian people on day today life. Majority of Hindus believes in practising religious rituals and cultures in their routine activities that are well supported by religious discourses. But modern religion and cultures are conflict because people get confusion about the religion and cultures. When we study U.R.Ananthamurthy's novel Smaskara we get conflict about in Hindu tradition because it is a multi-traditional country. In India we give more respect for Brahmins. When we study Samskara especially for Brahmin religion it deals conflict of Naranappa's cremation. The paper tries to argue how to the misunderstand of Dharma and cultural, rather than the understanding of it. The characters in the novel are extremely caste conscious in their corporal and spiritual conduct.

Keywords: Religion, Samskara, Culture, System, Caste, Pollution, Rituals, Untouchability, Moksha.

Introduction: The novel samskara is a religious novel about a decaying Brahmin colony in a south Indian village and contemporary poetic reworking of ancient Hindu themes and myths. In India the caste system of Hindu religion, which has been supported by religious text like bagwatgita Rig-Veda and manusmriti, has an immense influence on the lives of Indian people on day- today life and it makes a big conflict to the Indian people. The central theme of the novel Naranappa and the complications connected with the issues of his burial. Naranappa the rebel character is anti Brahminical in deeds but Praneshacharya who earned the title 'the crest jewel of Vedic learning' reject the double standard thinking after the death of his wife Bhagirathi. He wants to settle his life with Chandri a prostitute. The sudden death of Naranappa brings the real examination of Acharya's ideals, learning, and wisdom. This event brings a real man out of Acharya's being, burdened with suffocating scriptural knowledge. He wants to live like an ordinary man neither a righteous Brahmin nor the crest jewel of Vedic learning. The present paper analyses the novel to help the reader to understand the Indian cultural and religious conflict in human life.

U.R. Ananthamurthy's Samskara was originally written in Kannada in 1965, which was also made into award-winning film in 1970. It was later translated into English by a renowned Indian poet and translator, A.K. Ramanujan in the year 1976. Ananthamurthy attempts to expose Brahmanical cultural dominance, and unmask the religious hypocrisy through his novel. The paper aims to explore the hollowness and moral degeneration in the religious mandates, and show how the extreme caste consciousness in Brahmins creates disturbance in the corporal and spiritual life of people in the society. Samskara is acclaimed as a modern classic which holds mirror up to social evils like untouchability, casteism, ritualism, and disintegration in Hindu community. It presents the trajectory of religious crisis and cultural entanglement in a Brahmin agharhara.

Later on, this proposed division of castes transfused a sense of ascending superiority and descending inferiority in Hindus. It promoted faulty endogamous practices, and put restrictions on sharing food, and gave birth to the obnoxious practice of untouchability which has been the worst sin committed against the humanity. It has been marked that horrendous crimes have been committed using caste based discriminatory practices in the name religion which were supported by obscurantist dictums, puranic stories and religious myths.

The novel opens with a routinized schedule of Praneshacharya who is a central character in the novel. After obtaining mastery over Vedic Scriptures, and earning a title „the Crest-Jewel of Vedanta“ in Kashi during his religious training, Praneshacharya performs all religious rituals and discharges his religious duties as an ascetic religious authority in Durvasapura village. In the first few paragraphs of the novel, it can be understood that he marries with an invalid woman, Bhagirathi who is bedridden, just to serve his selfish purpose of obtaining „ripeness and readiness“ on his way to salvation and keep himself away from sensual pleasures of the world. It is a kind of self-chosen martyrdom with a goal of achieving higher fruit of salvation. He treats his Brahmin birth as a divine test for qualifying himself for salvation.

His decision of marrying with an invalid woman is a sign of his own selfishness for which he uses a poor woman as an object to climb a ladder to heaven. His denial to worldly pleasures and faith in stern religious idealism shows his hypocrisy, when later he copulates with Chandri, a Dalit woman and craves for sexual pleasure. After practicing his rituals and high religious precepts, he not only remains a confused and ordinary man who blindly believes in religious dogmas, but goes to the level of Naryanappa, an antagonist who throws away Brahman orthodoxy and lives with a Dalit concubine. The writer shows how Brahmins practice untouchability avoiding a touch or even a conversation with Dalits for the sake of maintaining purity. It has been shown how

initially Praneshacharya was more worried of his purity when she came his home to inform him about Narayanappa's sad demise: 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) But, once he gets associated with Chandri physically, he craves for her body. This shows clear hypocrisy on the part of Brahmins who normally avoids physical touch with Dalits in society for a fear of getting polluted, but they don't mind sleeping with their women.

The present research paper raises serious critical questions on the various facets of reality in socio-cultural and religious milieu. The novel helps the reader to understand the cultural crisis, set goals with right approach to progress positively in socially amicable atmosphere. "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" (Maheshwari1969:16). So the question is, are the bramins of agrahara really cultured? Have they been purged to understand the nature of Brahmin? The chief protagonist Praneshacharya undergoes the process of purification. His shift from hard core ritualism to realism is thought provoking. The author's iconoclasm flows undercurrent. The problem of the death rite of Naranappa is before the brahmin community of Durvasapura. Ananthamurthy asks the readers for the solutions for all the problems originating from casteism, untouchability, conflicting thoughts and actions in ritualistic life.

The novel opens with the death of Naranappa, a rebel character. A controversy arises regarding Naranappa's death rite because being a Brahmin he was antibrahminical in practice "Alive, Naranappa was an enemy; dead a preventer of meals; as a corpse, a problem, a nuisance." Praneshacharya stands for ritualism. He went to Kashi (Benaras), studied there, and returned with the title "Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning". He is the local guru of all the Brahmins, not only of Durvasapura but also of those living in the surrounding villages. He believes completely and practices the law of Karma in special. Praneshacharya wants to attain salvation, and is ready to undergo any sort of tests on the path to salvation. He has deliberately married an invalid sick woman. He leads a celibate life and is proud of his self-sacrifice. His life is pure, totally devoted to religion, utterly devoid of selfish motives. The another tarnished person who lives in this agrahara is Naranappa.

Naranappa a catalytic agent who affects change, favors modernism, rejects brahminhood and brings home Chandri, a prostitute, from Kundapura, a nearby town. He drinks alcohol and invites muslims to eat meat. He throws Saligrama, the holy stone which is believed to represent God Vishnu, into the river, and spits after it. If the flowers in the backyards of the other brahmins are meant mainly for the altar, and if their women wear only withered flowers gathered from the altar in their hair which hangs at their back like a rat's tail, Naranappa grows the night-queen plant in his front garden. Its intense smelling flowers are meant solely to decorate Chandri's hair which lies coiled like a thick black cobra on her back. Naranappa, with his muslim friends catches sacred fish from the temple tank, cooks and eats them. Other brahmins are aghast at this sacrilegious act. They have believed, till then, that these fish should not even be touched, that whosoever touches them will vomit blood and will die! Naranappa has even corrupted the youth of the agrahara. Because of him one young man left Durvasapura and joined the army, where he is forced to eat beef. Another young man left his wife and home, and joined a traveling group of singers and actors. Naranappa's only ambition in life seems to do everything that destroys the brahminhood of the agrahara. His only sorrow is that hardly anything of it is left to destroy, except for the brahminism of Praneshacharya. Naranappa dies but his actions struggle to correct the society. The immediate complicated question is, "Who should cremate Naranappa?" Every Brahmin is afraid to volunteer, because he fears that his brahminhood would thus be polluted because Naranappa was theoretically a brahmin when he died. The holy books and Lord Maruti offer no relief to Praneshacharya to find the answer. But Chandri, a prostitute has an answer not for the right person for cremating but for the enigmatic acharya and stinking orthodox society.

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"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 brahminism is ground into the mud."(12) He was disliked by all conservative Brahmins in the agrahara for his blasphemous behavior and hedonistic tendencies. He deliberately disobeyed all religious laws of Brahmins, and preached his own gospel of individual liberty and rational approach to the life. He got mingled with Dalits and Muslims, as he was fond of surrounded by friends and artists, loved a Dalit woman, Chandri openly, ate flesh and drank wine. He went to the extent to catch fish from the holy pond of Lord Ganesha to signal other Brahmins of his intention of throwing Brahminism into gutters.

Narayanappa recounted how youth was getting spoiled by sexy puranic stories which Praneshacharya shared with great penchant during his religious preaching in evening. The writer here pinpoints the ill-practices of Brahmins and how they cheat common people in the name of performing rites and rituals. Their survival depends upon the alms and meals they get for performing rituals on various occasions. Ananthmurthy makes serious observations of how some selfish and immoral Brahmins wait for the events taking place in the lives of people from their birth to death. This shows how priesthood practices have been highly commercialized in the name of performing religious rites and giving remedies on religious problems. archaic laws and attempt to

brand liberal and non-believer Naranappa as an outcaste just because of his association with Dalits and Muslims without understanding his rational perspective towards religion. He was not coward and hypocrite in his life, and did not get intimidated by hollow moral values. He openly accepted a Dalit woman as his life-companion, and treated her respectfully without giving any heed to stringent religious norms and social principles. His humanism could be seen in his friendly relations with all sorts of people across religion, caste and community. He was highly respected among Smartas, the low caste Brahmins of Parijatpura whom Madhavas, brahmins of Durvasapura, used to call „hybrid brahmins“, and treat them inferiorly. After knowing his friend's demise, Shankarayya, priest of Parijatpura expressed his sympathies in his words:

'According to brahmin thinking, "a snake is also a twice-born"; if you happen to see a dead snake, 'you've to perform the proper rites for it; you shouldn't eat till you've done so. As that's the case, it's absolutely wrong to sit back with folded arms when a brahmin has passed on to the bosom of God. After realizing the failure of Praneshacharya and other brahmins to get a solution from their religious law books and rituals, Chandri secretly cremates his lover's body with the help of Ahmad Bari, Muslim fish merchant and friend of Naranappa. In the stressful situation, Praneshacharya leaves his village in the quest of his new identity to get rid of his religious obligations to his community, and understands the practical ways of living life rather than pursuing rigid religious codes. His newly found freedom gives him a different level of realization which brings him back again to his village with profound humanness. The writer's intention behind his skillful characterization could be well-perceived in his introduction of selfless, liberal and humanist Dalit women against the backdrop of selfish, old-fashioned and powerless Brahmin women. Dalit women are portrayed with certain life force and freedom whereas brahmin women represent decayed and charmless life.

Ananthmurthy gives an indication of degeneration and worthlessness of Brahmanism, and expresses an urgent shift in the cultural tone. The novel shows that Hindu casteist social structure is a brahmanical hegemony which exercises a control over women's sexuality and outcasts' behavior who are easy prey due to their helpless and miserable condition in the society. The religious control over the lives of Dalits and women gets support from the patriarchal religious system. Such degenerated values are internalized by Dalit victims and upper caste victimizers. The writer knows the tragic predicament of society under the influence of unscientific religious codes which demand immediate transformation in the modern time.

Ananthmurthy is concerned about the steep decline in the morality of Brahmins who treat women and members of other caste and community inhumanly. The Brahmins are seen to be using oppressive methods in the name religious cultural, and dominating voiceless subalterns. They themselves are highly disrespectful to the basic moral values. Ananthmurthy realizes that religious fundamentalism is creating obstacles in the progress of human society. In short, the writer directly or indirectly hinting to an urgent need of revamp in Hindu society to prevent moral decline in Hindu society. Thus, he has attempted to exhibit the vices and follies of religious dogmatism through this novel with an intent to eradicate social evils like untouchability, casteism, and communalism from the society.

In a moment Chandri projects acharya to the world of ordinary mortals. A long list of rituals seems him futile. India has a value system that governs its intellect and sensibility. The writer depicts a socio religious cultural conflict in the novel. As a normal human being he wants to enjoy all the material pleasures centered to woman and children. But he cannot do this because his wife is a sickly woman whom he nurses following the Law of Nishkam Karma. The lack of sensual pleasure is creating psychological lacuna in him. He perceives some truth in Naranappa's ways of life and sex. When Naranappa attacks on Acharya's reading of lush sexy Purnas and his life devoid of sexual pleasure, Acharya stops telling the luscious Puranic stories in the evening and starts on moral tales of penance and he finds that:

Ananthmurthy has invested Naranappa with reformatory vigor and violence. Naranappa is an active player in the novel. His death puts a big question mark on the ritualistic society. Naranappa is an autocrat, he lives freely breaking all traditions and practices of brahminism. He does what he likes without pretensions and hypocrisy. So he seems an anti-social. But an anti-social individual is eventually a reformer also. He re-orientates the society – so also a spiritual man does not conform to society either and is a leader of society. But the way Naranappa displays a destructive phase of social change in the society. In the sixties it might have drifted many as we have been a country, with the understanding of Law of karma, samskars, morals and ethics. It seems objectionable as it does not portray the sublime Indian culture and, yes, it is acceptable that it may entertain few exceptions with very weak morals. Still we should strive to achieve the best of Indian wisdom and emerge out of the dirty drains of the west.

Although the novel slightly touches the problem of prostitution in traditional Indian societies, still there is no serious concern to understand the real nature of our culture. Casteism as we find it today is now nothing more than a misrepresentation and misinterpretation of a legitimate and progressive Vedic system known as varnashrama. The original Vedic system called varnashrama was legitimate and virtuous. It was meant for the progressive organization of society. Varnashrama is the Vedic system that divides society into four natural groups depending on individual characteristics and dispositions. Varna literally means color, relating to the color or disposition of one's consciousness, and, thus, one's likelihood of preferring or showing various tendencies for a particular set of occupations. This would be determined not by one's birth, but by one's proclivities as observed by the teachers in the school that the student was attending. For example, there are those who prefer to offer service to society through physical labor or working for others, or through various forms of expressions like dance and music (called Shudras); those who serve through agriculture, trade, commerce, business, and banking or administrative work (Vaishyas); those who have the talents of

leaders, government administration, police or military, and the protection of society (Kshatriyas); and those who are by nature intellectuals, contemplative, and inspired by acquiring spiritual and philosophical knowledge, and motivated to work in this way for the rest of society (the Brahmanas). It was never a factor of whether a person had a certain ancestry or birth that determined which class was most appropriate for him or her, although being born in a particular family or tribe would give a natural likelihood to continue in the same line of activity. In actual sense none of the characters in the novels except Praneshacharya stands in favour of brahminism strictly.

All the brahmins Durgabhatta and Sripathi, Dasacharya, Lakshmana and Garuda, are depraved and damned souls having insatiable lust for body, food, gold and property. The brahmin of agrahara are utterly decadent, narrow-minded, selfish, greedy, jealous. Their brahminhood consists solely of fulfilling rules, following traditions which are thousands of years without understanding reasons and logic behind them. They are afraid that if the rules are not followed disasters will fall upon them. In this way the agrahara of Durvasapura is nothing special as forty or fifty years ago many villages and towns in South India had such agraharas. Therefore the present novel is a fiction far away from the real Indian culture and it does not work as a lamp post to guide the souls wandering in dark. The small society of agrahara is in the changing phase of life style and reflects socio-religious and socio-psychological reality. Agrahara system is disintegrating. Samskara depicts loosing reins of actual religious understanding, which on the part of the writer seems a mere presentation of mundane reality rather the holding mirror to move the mass in the right direction. Ananthmurthy's most potent character Praneshacharya is the most fickle one, a mere book worm with sound retention capacity and reasoning and the least rationale to turn his knowledge into action. Society has been in great need for change in the right direction whether in late sixties, nineties or in the present time. And the novel presents merely the change of ethics but not the destination the change will lead to.

Ananthmurthy portrays the selfish and narrow attitude of corrupt brahmin community where objective approach to life is a mere principle of their teaching. These brahmin indulge in Varjit Karma. They are full of revolving dimensions of lust and worldly desires. Their lives are full of immoral actions as they do not meet the standards of morality. The true morality is grounded in spirituality and moral is that which reflects a spiritual awakening. Conduct is imperfect unless it proceeds from a spiritual vision of all being as one. All good spontaneously follows from spiritual realization. Samskara depicts the similarities between among Brahmin and low-caste people. These low castes live outside the (village) agrahara. They are poverty stricken, have no systematic life, they serve in the villages and farm and are untouchables. They believe in ghosts and demons. If some member of a family is sick, it is generally understood that he is under the influence of some evil spirit.

Impact of religion starts before the birth of an individual and continues even after death. It plays a major role in shaping the psyche of an individual and influences his decisions regarding marriage, and social relations. In the case of Hinduism, the most well known social practice that has been studied by the scholars in India and abroad is that of casteism. Samskara studies not only the spiritual aspect of Hinduism and the caste system, but also orthodoxy in rituals. The sociological and anthropological studies that have been done in the field of religion and casteism have tried to study them from the scientific point of view, but the novel treats them in a literary way. Without commenting directly on anything, the novelist tells his story and leaves the job of interpretation to the readers. The current paper is an attempt to study the novel as a treatise on the ways of achieving moksha and the validity of casteism from religious point of view, and its impact on the Indian social system.

The Hindus yearn for even a step further and want to achieve moksha, a kind of supra-existence which means freedom from the cycle of birth and death. But what is the best way of achieving that supra-existence is the question that has been contemplated by the human beings since the rise of religion. The question becomes even more important because of the diversity in Hindu beliefs and culture. Murthy probes this question through the character of a Brahmin named Praneshacharya who is renowned in South India for his knowledge of scriptures and is known as "crest jewel of Vedic learning." Another important issue that has been taken up in the novel is that of caste. It not only probes if the caste has its origin in the religion, but also its impact on the people of different castes.

The first difference that is evident between the Brahmins and the lower caste is that of complications in social life. The life of Brahmins is full of complications while the life of the untouchables is remarkably simple. This is evident from the title of the novel which also means the last rites of a person, for the Brahmins this is a very complex affair as they are forbidden to eat anything while the uncremated body is lying there in the agrahara. In addition to that there are a lot many rituals connected with the last cremation rites and there are lot many things at stake also. The Brahmins are afraid that they might lose their Brahminhood by cremating Naranappa who did not lead a life of an orthodox Brahmin. This complicated ritualistic affair is compared with the cremation rites of the untouchables who just leave the bodies and "fired the huts (Samskara, 40)." When the novel was published it was a centre of lot of controversy for its portrayal of the Brahmins. There are some people who have argued that caste system is a part and parcel of Hinduism, the writer himself was acutely aware of that. In his essay "Five Decades of my Writing" he tells: "The world I grew up assumed that the caste system and the hierarchies associated with it were rock-like and permanent and God-made" (2007:17). These myths are broken by the writer through the character of Praneshacharya.

The novelist shows that when a savant like Praneshacharya can misinterpret the Dharma then the others surely can. Then there is an incident in the novel where Praneshacharya recalls the story of a brahmin who was "debarred from the places of sacrifice" (Samskara, 48) because he was addicted to gambling, but even then the gods came to answer the gambler's call. This incident clearly shows that when the Gods can go to answer the gambler's call then surely they cannot be so prejudiced against some

human beings to label them untouchables, and thus the practice of untouchability is not of divine origins as some people have called it to be. Praneshacharya himself believes in the concept of pollution as in the beginning of the novel he does not want to talk to Chandri because "he would be polluted"(Samskara, 2). Towards the end of the novel Praneshacharya does not want to sit and eat in the temple because he is in pollution period. There is a popular belief that if any person in pollution will eat in the temple then the temple chariot will not move. Praneshacharya eats in the temple but the temple chariot does not stop. So the pollution caused by his wife's death proves to be a myth. Similarly the pollution caused by the touch of human beings and the entire system of untouchability based on the notion of inferiority of human beings is a myth which needs to be demolished. It is important that these thoughts have been aired by the author in many of his essays: "Hinduism means many things to many people. It is the worship of Nirakar Brahman, as well as fulfilling the most selfish desires through vratas. It says that this creation is the manifestation of God, and, it also holds the most rigid kind of caste system"(2007:305). This statement by Murthy brings out the essential dichotomy of the people who practise untouchability. The question that is posed by the writer is if every human being is a manifestation of God then how some of us can be untouchables.

Conclusion: The kind of critique Ananthmurthy has attempted could have been done by a Brahmin only. The novel becomes even more important as it is an account of an insider, an experience of a person who was a member of a community that practised untouchability. The novel is indeed a strong critique of the caste system and effectively proves that it has no place in the modern society and at the same time also proves that it has no religious sanction as argued by many. Moreover, the novel becomes even more authentic social document when we come to know that it is not entirely fictional and is based on the childhood experiences of the writer. The writer himself tells: "In my village everyone thought that Samskara was a totally realistic novel, and they identified every character with a living person in the agrahara. And when I went back to my village the woman next door said, "Oh Ananthu, you have created Chandri perfectly." Each and every character was real"(2007:370). Taking the raw material from his life, the writer remarkably proves that caste system has no sanction in the religion and at the same time proves that orthodoxy too is an alien concept for Hinduism which is dynamic and mobile and always ready to accept changes.

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