



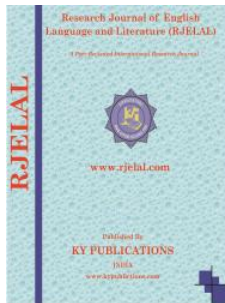
RITUALS IN CONFLICT WITH MODERNIZATION: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON U.R. ANANTHAMURTHY'S SAMSKARA

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<https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7119.245>



ABSTRACT

The novel *Samskara* is an accurate estimate of Brahmin society in the sixties or more correctly the Brahmin societies of all times which suffer the serious problems of backwardness despite having intellectuals among them. Reason behind all silly problems that emerge is that their energy is directed by age-old convictions, beliefs, customs, traditions and superstition. Ananthamurthy raises questions on very sensitive issues like rituals, samskara, untouchability, sex, community feeling. He scans human weakness such as greed, lust and lack of human concern in the Brahmin community. Ananthamurthy's characters favour freedom from the life in shackles of ritualistic performances. Naranappa the rebel character is anti Brahminical in deeds, but Praneshacharya who earned the title 'the crest jewel of Vedic learning' rejects 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 and criticizes the novel to help the reader to understand the cultural crisis and its reasons.

Keywords: Brahmin, Samskara, Rituals, Untouchability, Superstition, Dharma, Adharma, Prostitute, Orthodox, Karma, Ethics, Varnashrama, Agrahara, Purgation.

U. R. Ananthamurthy is one of the most important representative writers in the literature of Kannada language. The short novel *Samskara* by U. R. Anantha Murthy, Professor in English at the Mysore University, created a big rumpus in Karnataka when it was first published in 1965 in the Kannada language. The novel seems an accurate estimate of Brahmin society in the sixties or more correctly the Brahmin societies of all times which suffer the serious problems of backwardness despite having intellectuals among them as their energy has been directed by their age-old convictions, beliefs,

customs, traditions and superstition. Ananthamurthy raises sensitive issues like rituals, samskara, untouchability, sex, communal feeling and human weakness such as avarice, envy, selfishness, and lack of human concern in the Brahmin community.

Ananthamurthy's characters ultimately favor freedom from the shackles of ritualistic performances. Naranappa the rebel character in anti-Brahminical in deeds but Praneshacharya, the righteous Brahmin rejects 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 research paper raises serious critical questions on the various facets of reality in socio-cultural 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"

So the question is, are the Brahmins 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.

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. 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."(03)

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.

Orthodox society does its best to suppress the revolutionary Naranappa and by excommunicating they want to get rid of him But Praneshacharya is against this radical step. He still hopes to win over Naranappa, and lead him back to Dharma, the proper path. Who knows how long the battle between Dharma (adhering to the right path) and Adharma (rejecting the right path) would otherwise last? Some days ago Naranappa goes to Shivamogge, a town far away, and returns with high fever. Soon he develops a big lump, and dies within a couple of days.

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. In a moment Chandri projects acharya to the world of ordinary mortals. A long list of rituals seems him futile.

Initially Praneshacharya decides on the second course of action. He even runs away from home after his wife dies of plague. But wherever he goes he is haunted by the fear of discovery and haunted by Chandri's touch. The novel ends as Praneshacharya decides to return to Durvasapura, and to own up his fall. But Ananthamurthy, the author of "Samskara", does not answer the other important question. It is the question of what the brahmins should do when they are confronted with the confessions of Praneshacharya. What does one do when faced with such truth? As the translator A.K. Ramanujan puts it, the novel ends, but does not conclude.

India has a value system that governs its intellect and sensibility. The writer depicts a socio-religious change in the novel. We can set examples of the enlightened great men of all times like Ram Krishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, who had command over their senses and mind and worked for social, national and human causes and sacrificed all the pleasures of life within their approach. But Praneshacharya is a victim of his own fickle mind, practicing egotism, full of fear of losing honor. 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 Puranas 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 : his own enthusiasm for reciting the Puranas faded and died... the young listeners... stopped coming... Only women bent on earning merit, uttering the names of god over yawns in the middle of the stories, and old old men, were his audience now (26).

The society of Durvasapura requires immediate reform. The novel presents a sexually suppressed society, where sex is considered wrong and avoidable concept, yet everyone wants to enjoy it. The orthodox brahmins have forgotten the concept of free sex in natural society. Its necessity can't be overlooked in a healthy society, even Lord Krishna establishing the supremacy of sexual pleasure says: "Arjun I am the might of the mighty, free from passion and desire: in being I am the sexual desire not in conflict with virtue or scriptural injunction." (Bhagwadgita,VII:11) Sex is a true source of religiosity and all round social development. It is the lowest point of oneness, and meditation the highest peak of oneness and "a sexually suppressed society cannot be really religious because the function of mediation is being substituted by sex ... a sexually free society is a step toward seeking, searching, and the search will become keener as days pass." (Rajneesh 1973: 51).

Ananthamurthy has invested Naranappa with reformative 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 is eventually a reformer also. He re-orientes 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.

Ananthamurthy depicts a social change ensuing sexual intercourse either it is between Praneshacharya, a brahmin and Chandri a low caste prostitute, Naranappa and Chandri, or Shripathi a brahmin and Belly, Putta and Bhagirathi a prostitute. The question is- can such sexual relations transform the society or eradicate untouchability as there is union of high caste males and low caste females? If yes what a chaotic society that would be. 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 losing 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.

Ananthamurthy 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. Therefore; Swami Rama says: Highest morality is just such an adjustment of inner relations with outer relations that the good outside becomes greatest joy within. (Maheshwari 1969: 111) But all the brahmin of agrahara except Praneshacharya are corrupt and selfish of highest order. Dasacharya lives entirely on the meals that rahmin get at death-rites and anniversary (108). To the connoisseur eyes of Durgabhata, Chandri is, A real 'sharp' type exactly as described in Vatsyayana 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's the type who sucks the male dry...like Matsyagandhi, the Fisherwoman.... shyly trying to hide her breasts bursting through the poor rag of a sari. (08) Garuda seizes all the property of child-widow 'Laxmidevamma the 'I'll-Omen' or 'Half-wit Lakshmiddevamma' and leaves her to starve. The possession of gold torments Garuda and Lakshmana (niggard of niggards, emperor of penny-pinchers, mother deceiver etc). It is observed that the greed, envy and lust are behind the conflict and disintegration among these depraved brahmin of agrahara. It is also evident that the cause of disintegration is desire for more in every field and "so the more we acquire the greater is our disintegration... from this desire to be or to acquire more, springs the universal disease jealousy, envy etc." (Krishnamurthy 1970: 169). Shripati Lakshmana's son-in-law is a staunch follower of Naranappa. Anusuya deprives Sripathi of sexual pleasure he establishes relation with Belli, an outcaste shaven widow. He finds Belli better than any other brahmin girl he says, "which brahmin girl was equal to Belli? Her thighs are full when she's with him. She twists like a snake coupling with another". Thus he enjoys his life in his own way. He drinks toddy and maintains friendship with balladeer of Kelur troupe. 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 (Singh 1985: 78).

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. For example; when Beelli's parents are sick and crying out aloud of tormenting body pain and fever. But Chinne says: "Look how the fellow cries in fever. Don't know if the Demon is trading on him too." When Chowda and his wife die, the low caste community people gather weep on the death and set the hut on fire along with the dead bodies. Same method of cremation is repeated when Belli's parents die. These low-castes eat tobacco, drink liquor, work in farms and also satisfy sexual lust of strayed Brahmin to get money. These outcastes have belief in the existence of demons and evil spirits, therefore, in order to protect themselves from the anger of such evil spirits they offer them sacrifices. Belli's people sacrifice a cock to the demon and vow that they will sacrifice a sheep at the next new moon. Yet both Belli's parents "died the same night Praneshacharya's wife passed..." (106) Thus Ananthamurthy describes how the low caste people lead life full of superstitions .And therefore, their pain and misery never end.

Thus to conclude Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* portrays the rural life and activities of different segments of society in an agrahara but major focus is on the Brahmin community. It is a story of human existence with its psychological weaknesses and strengths. The novel shows the shift of ethics due to modernization. Ananthamurthy portrays a realistic picture of the hidden as well revealed facts of brahmin community. It is a nice description of follies and foibles of orthodox Hindu societies. So many critical questions are left to the readers, but the readers are not supposed to be the role players in such societies but the elites or the serious and silent observes. Therefore the novel fails to prove a lamp post or a revolutionary step to the upcoming generation for showing the true path of morality, ethics and brahmin life in the sublime vedic culture. The need of time is cultural

reformation as India has been facing cultural crisis and the novel with such stuff in the sixties or today hardly proves to be a valuable product to serve the real Indian culture. Because we stand for what is sublime we touch the fine veins of nature. Purgation (samskara) in the flame of Ancient Wisdom is still the need of hour.

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