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## To Be or Not to Be: Cultural Crisis and Politics of Caste in U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*

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### Abstract

*Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1989) is set in colonial India of the 1930s and 1940s in Durvasapura, an *agrahara*, a secluded Brahmin community that lives according to strict prescribed norms of orthodox Hinduism. Anantha Murthy offers fine portraits of a variety of characters as they struggle between natural urges and societal expectations, and has successfully crafted an impressive story. At the outset, it's a story that poses a cultural problem – which is complicated further as the story progresses – regarding performing the last rites of a Brahmin named Naranappa who did not subscribe to the norms of orthodox Brahminism in cohabiting with a Dalit woman, Chandri. The exploitation of the weak is open and universal stripping them of agency engaging in a conflict between the permitted and prohibited norms of society. The protagonist of the novel Praneshacharya, a pious Brahmin, who has spent his entire life practising austerity and looking after his sick wife, gives in to his urge and has one sexual interlude with Chandri. Subsequently through the mental conflicts that he has to undergo he becomes aware of the meaninglessness of religion and orthodoxy and realises the real meaning of his existence through a process of self-realisation and transformation. This paper intends to unfold the hegemony of the patriarchal Brahmin society depicted in Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* and expose hypocrisy and exploitation that existed in the name of orthodoxy and religion through an analysis of the text.

**Keywords:** Brahminism, caste, cultural imperialism, normative orthodoxy, resistance, transformation.

## Introduction

Writings from regions whose histories during the 20<sup>th</sup> century are “marked by colonialism, anti-colonial movements, and subsequent transitions to post-independence society” (Baldick 265) and are generally reformist in nature, pointing out and resisting the evils prevalent in pre-colonial and colonial times. U.N. Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara* depicts the conflict ingrained deeply into the Indian social structure which is stratified along the lines of caste. Rituals are prescriptive and normative and any deviation impacts society severely. Brahmins, the priestly upper class being at the top of the social hierarchy are supposedly the keeper of the rules that define Hinduism. *Samskara* poses a cultural problem regarding performing the last rites of a Brahmin named Naranappa who did not subscribe to the norms of orthodox Brahminism in that he cohabited with a Dalit woman, Chandri. The protagonist of the novel Praneshacharya, a pious Brahmin, who has spent his entire life practising austerity and looking after his sick wife, who is supposed to prescribe the rule and give his sage decision regarding the cremation of the now rotting body of Naranappa gives in to his urge and has a sexual interlude with Chandri. The conflict intensifies throughout the narrative and the hypocrisy of the society is exposed. This paper intends to unfold the hegemony of the patriarchal Brahmin society depicted in Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara* and expose hypocrisy and exploitation that existed in the name of orthodoxy and religion through an analysis of the text.

*Samskara* set in colonial India of the 1930s and 1940s in Durvasapura, is the story of an *agrahara*, a secluded Brahmin community that lives according to strict prescribed norms of orthodox Hinduism. It narrates the conflict of caste and the dilemma of accepting change within a staunch albeit corrupt Brahminical society. “Brahmanism (also known as Vedic Religion) is the belief system that developed from the Vedas during the Late Vedic Period (c. 1100-500 BCE) originating in the Indus Valley Civilisation after the Indo-Aryan Migration c. 2000-1500 BCE. It claims the supreme being is Brahman, and its tenets influenced the development of Hinduism”

(Mark n.p.). Joshua Mark elaborates that “Belief in the authority of the Vedas was encouraged by the priestly upper class – Brahmins – who could read Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas, whereas the lower classes could not. The Brahmins’ unique position further enhanced their reputation ...” (n.p.) and they dictated religious precepts for all. Brahminism has influenced Hinduism since the Vedic period till modern times and has been accused of “encouraging inequality and brutalisation of the lower classes”. The Brahmins have emphasised their elite position at the top of the social hierarchy and have maintained the caste system while being strictly ritualistic themselves.

The lower classes or the Dalits have always been at the margins of Indian society. Oppressed by cultural imperialism they neither have social status nor agency. In her essay about subalterns, Gayatri Spivak observes that:

In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference. Now, who would say that’s just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It’s not subaltern.... Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus; they don’t need the word ‘subaltern’.... They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are... they’re within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern... (Spivak 45-46)

Thus, the Dalit or the lower class who are outside of the discourse of the Hindu hegemonic class and are perpetually oppressed and rendered voiceless qualify for the term “subaltern”. In an earlier paper published in October 2017, Shruti Das has noted that,

The age-old practice of Hinduism based itself on the division of labour. The social hierarchy was formed according to the work each individual was assigned as a means of livelihood. Individual duty gradually became a family profession leading to the formation of guilds which later took on the nomenclature of caste. In the mainstream of Hindu life, according to the records of the agents of history, a class of people assigned with the duty of serving others were relegated to the margins and called shudras. They were rendered untouchable. The Untouchables or Dalits are a marginalised class victimised by the hegemonic Brahministic ideology of caste. This Hindu upper caste

ideology was used as an instrument to dehumanise, oppress, exploit and dominate the Dalits in India. (Das 48)

The novel depicts the conflict inherent in the Brahminic ideology alongside their age-old convictions, customs, and superstitions. The narrative raises sensitive issues like rituals, cultural imperialism, untouchability, sex, communal feeling, and human weakness or the lack of it in the Brahmin community in Durvasapura.

Ever since its publication, *Samskara* has been as controversial as it has been popular. It has been widely praised by the critics, but it has also been harshly attacked by fanatical Brahmins who went so far as to try to block the release of the film. The novel is an illustration of the “complex apparatus of rules, rituals, taboos” which is responsible for the decay of Indian civilisation. (Naipaul, 108). The novel is usually interpreted as a forceful portrayal of decadent Brahminism in modern India. *Samskara* can be read as a sad story of the fall from grace of a rare soul. It can also be read as a scathing attack on the intellectual bankruptcy and barrenness of an old order. It can also be read as a naturalist realist presentation of the human condition. And it can also be read as a celebration of an untouchable who is responsible for the transformation of Praneshacharya from an orthodox Brahmin into a new human being free from orthodoxy. But the focus of this study is to unfold the hegemony of the patriarchal Brahmin society depicted in the narrative and expose hypocrisy and exploitation that existed in the name of orthodoxy and religion through an analysis of the text.

### **Samskara: Cultural Crisis**

U.R. Ananatha Murthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*, translated from Kannada by A. K. Ramanujan, has become an important treatise bringing to the fore the crisis of culture existing in the rigid Hindu socio-religious system. The translator rightly notes in his Afterword, that *Samskara* is “a movement, not a closure” in any traditional sense of the term (147). The readers are as “anxious, [and] expectant” (138) (parenthesis mine) as the protagonist himself. As the translator puts in his Afterword:

The opening event is a death, an anti-brahminical brahmin's death-and it brings in its wake a plague, many deaths, questions without answers, old answers that do not fit the new questions, and the rebirth of one

good brahmin, Praneshacharya. In trying to resolve the dilemma of who, if any, should perform the heretic's death-rite (a *samskara*), the Acharya begins a *samskara* (a transformation) for himself. A rite for a dead man becomes a rite of passage for the living. (139)

The expressions 'anxiety, expectancy' signify the crisis of contradictions and intensify the urgency of negotiation.

Samskara is the story of the community of orthodox Brahmins of Durvasapura where live two Brahmins, Naranappa and Praneshacharya, are diametrically opposite in ideology. Naranappa, whose cremation is the lynchpin of the story, is projected as an anti-hero, a rebel, and a denouncer of Brahminical rules. He eats meat, consumes alcohol, and also cohabits with an untouchable woman, a prostitute named Chandri. He defies all notions of culturally prescribed purity. Whereas, Praneshacharya, the head of the *agrahara*, is a learned Brahmin, a pious and rule-abiding man who religiously serves his community and his invalid wife. After returning from Kashi, he married an invalid girl, Bhagirathi, in order to earn salvation in living a life of sacrifice and selfless service to her. "The Acharya is filled with pleasure and a sense of worth as sweet as the five-fold nectar of holy days; he is filled with compassion for his ailing wife. He proudly swells a little at his lot, thinking, 'By marrying an invalid, I get ripe and ready'" (2). We read:

When he married her he was sixteen, she twelve. He had thought he should renounce the world, become a sanyasi, live a life of self-sacrifice. That was the ideal, the challenge, of his boyhood days.... He had cooked for her, fed her the wheat-gruel he had himself made, done meticulously every act of daily worship for the gods, read and explicated the holy texts for the brahmins-Ramayana, Bharata, Bhagavata, etc.-hoarded his penances like a miser his money. (75-76)

The community of Brahmins depends on his advice and decision in all critical situations. While Praneshacharya is the keeper of a rigid social system, Naranappa plays the role of Mephistopheles enticing him into profane ways. Juxtaposing these two characters Anantha Murthy "critiques and subverts a social system erected on degraded and unexamined cultural-religious foundations" (Raval 114). Meenakshi Mukherjee, a noted critic, rightly observes "the author's attempt to exploit the tension between two world views" (166) in the narrative of *Samskara*.

The title of the novel “samskara” refers to the socio-religious purification ritual associated with death, here the death of a Brahmin. “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” (Maheshwari16). The ritual of conducting samskara after cremating the body of Naranappa gives rise to a conflict dictated by the cultural imperialism of the Brahmins and their sense of purity and profanity. Naranappa had deliberately flouted all the norms made friends with Muslims, eaten meat, indulged in alcohol and lived with a lower caste woman, and finally died a reprobate. The cultural crisis in the text emanates from his death and the moral and social issues of performing his death rites. As he had no offspring the responsibility of cremating his body and conducting the rituals fell on his relatives Garuda and Lakshmana, both of whom shirked the responsibility claiming that they had cut ties with him long since. In the chapter “Sexuality, Psychology, Biology” Stuart Elden in his book *The Archeology of Foucault* (2023) discusses Foucault’s observation of the “disruptive nature of ... the figure of the libertine ... (where) the more common penalties (were) ... banishment or confinement” (96) which in our context applies to the case of Naranappa. But Naranappa was never banished as he threatened to pollute the entire community with the help of his muslim friends if any dire measures were taken against him. Thereby his punishment was “condemnation of the act” and a “moral censure of the person” (Elden 96) which continued even after his death.

The religious Brahmins of the *agrahara*, young and old, customarily could not touch food till the body was cremated. The stench from the rotting body became unbearable as the pangs of hunger in their stomachs yet the Brahmins could not decide what to do. The many scriptures and religious texts could not give Praneshacharya an answer to the dilemma. As a last resort, hungry, tired, and weak he headed towards the temple of Lord Maruti to pray and seek his guidance in resolving the matter of samskara of Naranappa’s body. Chandri, who had first informed him of the death and who had also offered all her gold jewellery for the cremation of her lover, waited patiently outside the temple for Praneshcharya to come out and announce God’s decision. No matter how hard he

prayed, God did not yield and finally remembering that it was time for his wife's medicine Praneshcharya came out of the temple. The compassionate Chandri who blamed herself for the fate of the Brahmin fell at his feet. In the dark her, clothing tore and came open as Praneshacharya bent forward to touch her hair in blessing.

The Sanskrit formula of blessing got stuck in his throat. As his hand played on her hair, Chandri's intensity doubled. She held his hands tightly and stood up and she pressed them to her breasts now beating away like a pair of doves. Touching full breasts, he had never touched, Praneshacharya felt faint. As in a dream, he pressed them. As the strength in his legs was ebbing, Chandri sat the Acharya down, holding him close. The Acharya's hunger, so far unconscious, suddenly raged.... (63)

The emotions and sexual desire that Praneshacharya had repressed as the guardian of his culture surfaced in the physical pleasure that he experienced with Chandri.

It was midnight when the Acharya woke up. His head was in Chandri's lap. His cheek was pressed into her low naked belly. Chandri's fingers caressed his back, his ears, his head. As if he had become a stranger to himself, the Acharya opened his eyes and asked himself: Where am I? How did I get here? What's this dark? Which forest is this? Who is this woman?

It felt as though he'd turned over and fallen into his childhood, lying in his mother's lap and finding rest there after great fatigue. (67)

Chandri's body had become his passage to a new world and new knowledge, a site of solace. He felt a different man, not guilty but emancipated. Minakshi Mukherjee notes "the difficult and uneasy process of transition between the fixed settled order of life and the still inchoate stirring of self" (167) which is presented in the character of Praneshacharya. He realises that he can no longer bear the burden of his culture. He asks Chandri to go ahead of himself and tell the people of the *agrahara* about their communion.

'Chandri, get up. Let's go. Tomorrow morning when the brahmins gather, we'll say this happened. You tell them yourself. As for my authority to decide for the *agrahara*, I have.'

Not knowing what to say, Praneshacharya stood there in confusion.

'I've lost it. If I don't have the courage to speak tomorrow you must speak out. I'm ready to do the funeral rites myself. I've no authority to

tell any other brahmin to do them, that's all.' Having said the words, Praneshacharya felt all his fatigue drop from him. (68)

His communion with Chandri was a transgression of ethics held dear by his society. The "... prohibitions, exclusions, limitations, values, freedoms, and transgressions of sexuality, all its manifestations, verbal or otherwise, are linked to a discursive practice" (Elden 96) which was prevalent in Durvasapura. Although Praneshacharya feels liberated he lacks the courage to speak out to his community about his sexual interlude with Chandri. The conflict in his mind is like that of Hamlet and so is his procrastination. Like Hamlet, he is unable to decide to disclose his actions and denounce himself or to wait for a more opportune moment. "He would never have the courage to defy brahmin practice as Naranappa did. His mind mocked: 'What price your resolve to join Chandri and live with her? If you must, do it fully; if you let go, let go utterly. That's the only way to go beyond the play of opposites, that's the way of liberation from fear'" (116).

The Brahmins waited in hunger and fear for Praneshcharya to return with some news from the temple that would resolve the problem of cremating the rotting body of Naranappa. A baffled Praneshacharya paces about in his house trying to come to terms with his conflicting self.

'What shall I do? What shall I do?' When he gave his wife her usual medicine as she lay groaning in the dining room, his hands trembled and spilled the medicine. As he held it to her lips, as he looked into his broken wife's pitted eyes, those helpless visionless symbols of his self-sacrifice and duty as a householder-he felt his legs twitch and double-up, as if in troubled sleep, as if in a dream he fell dizzily into bottomless netherworlds. At the end of the beaten path of a quarter century of doctor-patient relations, of affection and compassion, - he seemed to see an abyss. (75)

The diligent self-sacrifice in taking care of an invalid wife and hoping to thereby attain salvation doesn't seem to be his goal anymore. "Did he clutch this duty, this dharma, to protect this wife lying here lifeless, a pathetic beggarwoman did the dharma, clinging to him through the action and culture of his past, guide him hand in hand through these ways?" (75). He no longer had answers to such questions. The rhetorical questions appear existentialist as they



address the fulfilment of his being. He does not believe that he has signed with Chandri because he had not sought it, instead, his words propose an existentialist ethics “Even if I lost control, the responsibility to decide was still mine. Man’s decision is valid only because it’s possible to lose control, not because it’s easy. We shape ourselves through our choices, bring form and line to this thing we call our person” (98). His wife dies of plague and he leaves the village after cremating her. His journey becomes his bildungsroman. He emerges a “new man” resolved of the conflicts of purity, profanity, and pollution.

At the end of the novel when he returns to the *agrahara* and anticipates explaining himself as a “new man” to his community, he distances himself from religio-cultural shackles. He knows that he is not a sinner for indulging in desire. There is no repentance or trace of sorrow in him as he prepares to face his people. He is beyond conflicts and dualities of social norms and believes that “only the form we forge for ourselves in our inmost will is ours without question” (135). Shaping ourselves through choices, and forging our own form, are clear notions about “leaving the ghostly stage behind” (123). Praneshcharya justifies his actions by arguing that both Mahabala, his friend, and Naranappa lived the life they chose to defy the hegemonic culture of Brahminism and had no regrets in life. He says, “I’m not free till I realise that the turning is also my act, again I’m to answer for it. What happened at that turning? Dualities, conflict, rushed into my life. I hung suspended between two truths, like Trishanku” (98-99). At this juncture, he feels free of the dualities and hypocrisy of culture.

## Conclusion

Anantha Murthy critiques and subverts the politics of cultural imperialism of Brahminism. He also points to the evils in the rigidity of the caste system held sacred by Brahminism. The portrayal of anti-heroic characters like Naranappa and Mahabala who reject the cultural imperialism of Brahminism to embrace Epicureanism serves as a contrast to the self-sacrificing Praneshacharya and his kind who renounce worldly pleasure, repress their desires to attain some mythical salvation. Chandri is used as a catalyst to provoke the growth of Praneshacharya into a new man who realises that life

cannot run along prescriptive lines, rather existential choices define a man. The narrative pointedly exposes the hypocrisy of the Brahmins like Shripati, Garuda, Lakshmana, and the other Brahmins of Parijatapura who would be polluted if the shadow of a Dalit crossed their way but would secretly indulge in sex with lower caste women without any qualms. People like Garuda and Lakshmana destroy the good values for which Brahmin society is held in great esteem. Like them, many Brahmins have resorted to greed, anger, jealousy, and lust. They pose as the protectors and legislators of the values of orthodox Brahminism while violating those very norms.

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