

**Interrogating the Monolithic Culture of India:
A re-visioning of U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara***

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Abstract

Samskara, the title of U R Ananthamurthy's novel, is a Sanskrit word and it has multiple meanings, but death ceremony is the most predominant one. Ananthamurthy plays on the phonemic and phonetic interplay between the three words – *Samskara*, *Samsara* and *Shankara*. Ananthamurthy's portrayal of *agrahara* and its members is strikingly authentic and almost makes the reader believe it to be an ethnographic account, bleeding with realistic representation. But it is difficult to say that his depiction of the predicament of *shudras*, the *chandals* who are deprived of their very human identity and are mere stinking carcasses living in the margins of *agraharas* is equally authentic and realistic. The issues of caste discrimination and feminism seem to have more contemporary significance than they had in 1960s. This paper attempts to interrogate the Monolithic Culture of India in the novel.

Key Words: Dalit Women, monolithic, *agraharas*

Introduction:

In his *Afterword* to the English Translation of *Samskara*, A.K.Ramanujan discusses the manifold meanings of the word *samskara** (Ramanujan, 39), and then observes that these various meanings taken together inform the action of the novel. The most crucial event which forms the fulcrum of the central action in the novel is the death of Naranappa and the question of his cremation or *samskara*. So the novel seems to be mainly about Naranappa's cremation or *samskara*. But a close reading reveals that the question of Naranappa's cremation recedes to the background, and it is replaced by new problems which are more serious and complex than the physical cremation. In short, Naranappa's *samskara* provides the novelist with an occasion to debate the complexities of various aspects of Indian culture, present and past.

Naranappa, a rebel *brahmin* in the *agrahara*

of *Durvasapura*, challenges the outmoded customs and rituals of his community more vehemently when he is dead than when he was alive. Though he had violated and condemned the *Brahminic* life, he had not been excommunicated, and therefore he is still a *Brahmin* even in his death. In short, Naranappa had abandoned *brahminhood*, but *brahminhood* had not abandoned him. It raises the following questions related to *samskara*: Can one person be a *Brahmin* by birth? Is it the birth alone that determines *brahminhood*? Can one question *brahminhood* and still be a *Brahmin*? Who is then a real *Brahmin*?

These questions can shake even the very foundation of caste system in India. The ancient scriptures of cultural India fail to answer these questions well. It highlights the absurdity of casteism, a very ancient practice in India which has eaten away the very vitality of our social, cultural and religious

life.

Ananthamurthy's novel presents two distinct *samskaras*; the *samskara* of the *brahmins* and the *samskara* of the *sudras*. The *samskara* of the *sudras*, as depicted in the novel, seems to threaten and dominate over the decadent *samskara* of the *brahmins*. Naranappa and his young followers along with Putta, Chandri, Belli and Padmavathi represent the emerging *sudra samaskara*, while Praneshacharya and his fellow *brahmins* in *Durvasapura* stand for the decaying *brahminism* with all its superstitions and evils. Perhaps, Anantha Murthy in this novel anticipates the emergence of a *Dalit* culture in opposition to the upper caste domination. On this account, as K.P. Sankaran, one of the translators of *Samskara* into Malayalam points out, Anantha Murthy had to face criticism from the people of his own orthodox community (15). Again, the novel deals with two more *samskaras*, namely, the ancient Indian *samskara* and the modern western *samskara*. Anantha Murthy, who had his higher education in the west, is critical of the age-old practices of his own community. In his enthusiasm, the novelist goes to the extent of idealising a drunkard and womaniser like Naranappa, an anti-*brahmin*. Further he makes Praneshacharya, a pious *brahmin*, vulnerable to all temptations. The novel which has a historical background of 1930s gives enough hints about the emergence of modern ideas through the young characters like Shyama who joins army. Manjayya of the Parijathapura is again a man of modern ideas; it is he who recognises the dangers of plague in his *agrahara*.

The novel also deals with a *Dalit* feminine

samskara. The *brahminic samskara* is patriarchal in its character. The women are, of course, respected as is evident from Praneshacharya's treatment of his ailing wife, Bhagirathi. But the women have no role in serious domestic or social issues. On the other hand, in the *Dalit samskara* represented by Chandri, Putta and others, women are superior to men; Chandri is capable of taking very wise and practical decisions of her own which amaze even men. Her decision to cremate Naranappa with the help of a Muslim demonstrates it. Anantha Murthy thus perhaps forecasts in the novel the emergence of feminism combined with *Dalit* movements.

Two more *samskaras* can be traced in the novel: the ascetic *samskara* of Praneshacharya and the erotic *samskara* of Naranappa. Praneshacharya's piety demands suppression of sexual desires which proves self-destructive. As Jung observes, "the person who has never been in love lacks not only experience of the erotic, but also a whole dimension of human understanding." In Jung's view erotic experience is most creative, because it "can open the door to a world of feeling and emotion which is not necessarily or wholly erotic (Qtd. in Storr, 51)." Praneshacharya himself experiences it from his sexual contact with Chandri. It opens up to him a new world of experience; then onwards he is a changed person. Naranappa lives a life of his own; he is not bound by social or religious taboos. He is thus an existentialist in his own way. He attains his salvation not through self-restraint, but through indulgence in sensual pleasures. The novel proclaims the triumph of eroticism over asceticism. The hypocrisy of the ascetic *brahmins*

is also exposed in the novel. They have no trauma in violating the *dharma* of their religion secretly for the gratification of their sensual desires.

A.K.Ramanujan maintains that *samskara* also determines the form along with the content of the novel (142). There are three stages in the *brahminic* ritual of 'upanayana' or initiation which is a part of their *samskara*: (a) Separation (b) Transition, and (c) Re-incorporation. One can trace three parallel stages in the structure of the novel, namely (a) going away (b) seclusion, and (c) coming back. After the demise of his wife, Praneshacharya leaves his house and goes in search of Chandri in *Kundapura*. His aimless wanderings in the company of Putta, his encounter with Padmavathi and his experiences in the festival together form the second stage of seclusion. Praneshacharya's decision to return to *Durvasapura* in order to confess his sins to his fellow *brahmins* marks the final stage. These three stages manifest again in the novel as (a) questions (b) delay in finding answers (c) answers. The first part of the novel raises some intriguing questions regarding the cremation of Naranappa. The second part deals with the vain attempt of the *brahmins* to find answers. They meet the *smatha brahmins* of *Parijatha pura* and also an astrologer, but they fail to get a satisfactory answer. The last part brings out the answers to the complex problems. The *brahmins* are told by the *swami* of the Monastery to make some modifications in the cremation ceremony of Naranappa. Praneshacharya too receives answers to his personal problems.

There are critics who believe that *Samskara* is primarily a religious novel, and a contem-

porary reworking of ancient religious themes. K.V.Subbanna counters this argument, and remarks that this kind of an approach is reductive (3); it ignores the wider significance of the novel. The novel raises not only religious problems, but problems related to health, food, environment, money and ethics which are essentially cultural. Naranappa's death by plague creates a health problem in the *agrahara*. Until his body is cremated nobody can eat food – this is a problem of food. The rotten body of Naranappa stinks, and spoils the whole environment in the *agrahara*. Chandra's offer of gold creates the problem of money. Durgabatta's infatuation towards Chandri and Garudacharya's ill-treatment of poor and old Lakshmidiviamma are some of the ethical problems in the novel. In fine, one feels that *Durvasapura* with these manifold problems of *samskara* appears to be a miniature India. The novel thus develops into an allegory.

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Ramanujan quotes the following from *A Kannada-English Dictionary* by the Rev. F. Kittel, Manglore, 1894: *Sam-s-kara*. 1. Forming well or thoroughly, making perfect, perfecting; finishing, refining, refinement, accomplishment. 2. Forming in the mind, conception, idea, notion; the power of memory, faculty of recollection, the realizing of past perceptions ... 3. Preparation, making ready, preparation of food, etc. cooking, dressing ... 4. Making sacred, hallowing, consecration, dedication; consecration of a king, etc. 5. Making pure, purification, purity. 6. A sanctifying or purificatory rite or essential ceremony (enjoined on all the first three classes or castes). 7. Any rite or ceremony. 8. Funeral obsequies (P.1479).

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