

Elements of Caste and Superstition in the Work of U.R. Anantha Murthy's Samskara

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Dr. Udupi Rajagopala Acharya Anantha Murthy was one of the pioneers of the Navya literary movement in contemporary Kannada Literature. He received Gyanpeetha Award; the highest literary honour in India for his novel Samskara in 1994 and the Government of India also honoured him with the prestigious award the Padma Bhushan. He was an Indian contemporary writer, a renowned academic, well known for his striking literary work and the outstanding critic of his generation in Kannada, a Dravidian language spoken in Karnataka state. He was born on 21st of December 1932 at Melige, a remote village in Tirthalli Taluk in Shimoga district in Karnataka. He was brought up in a conservative Brahmin household. He completed his primary schooling in a traditional Sanskrit school in Durvasapura and graduation from Mysore University. After receiving a Master of Arts degree from the Mysore University, he won a Commonwealth scholarship. Later he moved to Birmingham University, England to complete his doctorate. His dissertation topic was "Politics and Fiction in the 1930s," under the supervision of the English critic and novelist, Malcolm Bradbury. Anantha Murthy's Samskara is first published in 1965; later on, it is translated into English in 1976, by A.K. Ramanujan and finally it is made into a film in 1970. It has created a lot of controversies. Samskara is not only translated into English, Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam, Marathi, Urdu, Tamil and Gujrati but also translated into other foreign languages as Russian, German, Hungarian, French, and Swedish etc. Apart from the novels, he is also known for his poems, stories and essays in the literary field. The Indian Literature of regional languages makes effort by such genius which is so attractive and unique that the people from India and all over the world are reading and glorifying it.

In writing Samskara, Anantha Murthy presents the realities of his own oppressive Madhva Brahmin's past in a remote Karnataka village, where people believe in traditional caste system and follow it very blindly. The novel deals with the politics of religion, caste problems and superstition in Indian Brahmin society. The theme of the novel is the story of a decaying Brahmin; it revolves around the death of Naranappa, who deliberately separates himself from the so called Brahminism. He rejects the authority of the Vedas, opposes to caste, treats Brahmins with contempt, and always favours to the worldly pleasures. Naranappa reveals his view that "All your Brahman respectability, I'll roll it up and throw it away for a little bit of pleasure with one female" (Anantha Murthy, Samskara, p.21. He defies and disobeys the taboo, abandons his Brahmin wife and sets up his new house with the outcaste Chandari, whom he has brought from Kundapura. He admirably sums up, "Who in

the world can live With a Girl who gives no pleasure... p.20?

Naranappa always keeps distance with the Brahmin orthodoxy. He represents himself in ultimate response to Brahmin orthodoxy in the 1930's and 40's. Anantha Murthy depicts the controversy between Brahmins and Dalits, portrays trap of superstitions in uneducated Indian village and shows marginalisation of women in Indian social system. In India, the traditions from birth to death are followed by the Hindu very respectfully. These elegant traditions are called Sanskaras. These important Sanskaras are Garbhadhan, Punsvana, Jatkarma, Namkarna, Upnayana, Samavartana, Vivah, Antyashti etc. According to Manu, Sanskaras purify the body. Sanskaras are not only good for individual but these are the responsibilities of human beings towards the society. Within this process the balance and harmony of individual and society is maintained and both get progressed. The novel depicts the social issues in the form of religion, belief in superstitions and moral approach of the characters towards evil social taboos and sin. The opening scene starts with the conversation of Chandari with Praneshacharya about the death of Naranappa. Chandari, who belongs to low-caste, when talking with a Brahmin, becomes a kind of sin in the society. So, she feels that, "If the acharya talked to her, he would be polluted; he would have to bath again before his meal. But how can a morsel go down the gullet with a woman waiting in the yard" p.2.

Anyone, who experiences humiliation, injustice and exploitation at the hands of the society, can be called Dalit and these experiences towards Dalits are very common concept in Indian society. In Sanskrit, Dalit means divided, broken, and of course oppressed. The Blacks in America and Dalits in India are facing same problems. Both are discarded by the high caste people. For hundreds of year Dalits have lower and negligible position. Dalit, the lowest caste in India, is known as Untouchable. There are four-fold varna system in Hinduism and are seen as forming a fifth varna, named Panchama, belongs to Dalit. After knowing about the death of Naranappa from Chandari, Praneshacharya eagerly goes to Garudacharya, a close relative of Naranappa for five generations. Anantha Murthy explains minute details of different kinds of religious ceremonies and norms on the death of someone in the village. Hearing death news, Garudacharya leaves his dinner and rises from his seat to follow the rules set by their ancestors and forefathers. He says to his wife: "It's all right for the children. They can eat. Only we adults shouldn't till the funeral rites are done" p.3. The news of Naranappa's death spreads like a wild fire. The Brahmins of Agrahara get together to solve the problem but all effort goes in vain.

Now it is a social problem for the Brahmins of Agrahara which brings dissatisfaction, sufferings and misery among them. Praneshacharya speaks, "Naranappa's death rites have to be done: that's problem one. He has no children. Someone should do it: that's problem two" p.4. Nobody wants to perform the rites for Naranappa because he, "slept regularly with a low caste woman," he even ate what she cooked," "besides drinking, he ate animal flesh," "this fellow was mischievous" pp.5-6. Anti-Brahmin activities by Naranappa now have become an obstacle in his funeral. Praneshacharya after searching answers in holy books is also unable to come on a solution.

An extreme form of punishment for public crime in simple society is often excommunication and banishment from the society, it is obvious decision. Thinking about Naranappa's overruling tendency of religion and morality, Praneshacharya now thinks about Dharma and Brahmanism. Dharma covers the way of life of all the creatures created by the nature in this world. In the Mahabharata it is stated that, "Dharma protects those, who protect the Dharma;" p.9 he thinks about Naranappa that:

"he may have rejected Brahminhood, but Brahminhood never left him. No one ever excommunicated him officially. He didn't die an outcaste; so he remains a Brahmin in his death. Only other Brahmin has any right to touch his body. If we let someone else do it, we would be sulling our Brahminhood" p.9.

Prevailing rigidity in caste system in Indian social structure is an important aspect of the novel. Under the Hinduism, the Hindu community is divided into four classes, Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra. Caste system has been the bane of Indian society. In ancient times this division was based on Karma not on Janma, but later on, it generated and spread all over in our social structure. In Hindu society, the classes under Brahmanical order practice their system of faith in accordance with Vedas, Puranas and other sacred related literature. The primary function of the Brahmin caste is to perform various religious and ceremonial rituals. In order to establish the authority of their system of faiths more rigorously and in an effective manner Brahminical system of faiths created rigid and complicated Karmkands.

The major problem in Agrahara village is not the issue of cremation of Naranappa, but the existing values and traditions. Every Brahmin is seared to go against the orthodox systems of society. As the most intelligent and sensible man it is the duty of Praneshacharya to guide, supervise, conduct and restrict the individual behaviour within the orbit of his caste group and in relation to other caste group.

Dalit literature emanates from a terrible sight of oppression and exploitation by a dominant caste of Brahmins, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs etc. Dalit movement was active in India in the entire Bhakti Movement, Kabir, Nanak, Ravidas were great poets and social reformists of their age, who worked not only for literary field but worked for political, religious and social reforms as well as they criticised this fossilized caste system. Post – Independence

Indian writers also took this issue very seriously through their writings. On one hand, Anantha Murthy has presented strict and rigid norms of Brahminhood, on the other hand, through the character of Chandri she has presented another side of coin i.e. pathetic and marginalization of dalits.

After the verdict of Praneshacharya, Chandri abruptly takes a bold step and offers all her jewellery as the expense of the cremation of Naranappa. Praneshacharya insists Garudacharya and Lakshmanacharya, as they are the only closest relatives, so it becomes their responsibility to cremate the body. But they also refuse to perform the rites. Now instead of Brahminism their greedy and niggard wives are thinking about the gold offered by Chandri. Praneshacharya thinks about rituals which say, "Until the body is properly removed there can be no worship, no bathing, no prayers, and no food, nothing" p.12.

Another Brahmin, Dasacharya suggests that Naranappa was very friendly with the Brahmins of Parijatapura. If the Parijatapura people are ready to perform the rite, their problem of cremation will be solved and the entire gold will also be with the close relatives of Naranappa. Other solution for this problem the gold should be given to Maruti temple and Garudacharya and Laxmanacharya both should perform the rites. But they refuse and once again Praneshacharya gets worried over the issue.

Most of Indian Writers have used mythical and legendary stories in their works, Ramayana and Mahabharata the two famous epics of Indian origin are not only part of our religion but the life's philosophy and morality behind them influence every human being. Anantha Murthy's effort to save Hinduism and Brahminism through the villagers of Agrahara is a forwarding step in this direction. Like Mahabharata, Anantha Murthy's concept of creating faith and belief in social norms is not by force or terror, rather he tries to conceptualise between theory of religion and Dharma. It also leads to Brahmin realisation which is impossible without moral uplift. In Indian culture the word Dharma includes the performance of rites but it further comprehends cultural organisation and spirituality. Apart from this it has been equated with self-knowledge. On the other hand, religion is a system of faith created by the various incarnations, prophets and angles from time to time.

The ancient name of Agrahara was Durvasapura, it is supposed to be related to sage Durvasa and in the middle of Agrahara, there is Tunga River flows. It is also believed that during stay in forest Pandavas stay for sometime in Kaimara. Once Draupdi desires to swim in that river and in order to fulfill her wish Bheema dams up the water. Next morning Durvasa becomes angry and Dharamraja requests Bheema to break the dam. Bheema breaks the dam in three places to flow water properly. This legendary story is still alive in Agrahara.

Praneshacharya promises Naranappa's dying mother to take proper care of him. But when he tries to counsel her, Naranappa's statement makes him restless, "Your texts and rites... don't worry any more. The Congress party is coming to power; you'll have to open up the temples to all outcastes" (p.21). This statement forces readers to think

whether he was really bad or he deliberately wanted to break the taboos and norms made by the society. Several times Praneshacharya tries to convince Naranappa but every time he makes him angry and insults him by ignoring morality and tradition of Brahminism. Religion and morality are the most influential forces of social control. The Hindu caste system is looked upon as divine institution. People who violate the rules are considered sinners and it is believed that God will punish them. Due to this internal fear people do not have the courage to violate the laws of the caste system. In the case of Naranappa, he does everything which is against the society and most important against the Hindu religion. Naranappa strongly puts his views to Praneshacharya:

“You read those lunch sexy Puranas, but you preach a life of barrenness. But my words, they say what they mean: if I say sleep with a woman, it means sleep with a woman; if I say eat fish, it means eat fish. Can I give you Brahmins a piece of advice? Push those sickly wives of your into the river...And if you don't experience god when you wake up, my name isn't Naranappa” pp.25-26.

Under these undecided circumstances, the only motive behind the cremation is the gold offered by Chandri. Only for the sake of gold, Garudacharya and Lakshmanacharya's wives are insisting them to perform the rites. So, both of them are ready to perform the rites and give consent to Praneshacharya. But Praneshacharya remains undecided because dharma does not allow such kind of things, “If the problem of the dead man's rites should be solved, the problem of ornaments would not be solved p.34. Till now, nobody is thinking about the dead body. So, Dasacharya, who lives next to Naranappa, requests Praneshacharya to take quick decision as the body is stinking. He suggests that without taking gold he can perform the rites along with four persons. Here once again the reason for Dasacharya's offer for the rites is his own need ie his hunger. He is a glutton and relies on the food given by the others.

Another woman character portrays in the novel is Lakshmiddevamma. Although her family background disturbs her throughout her life but being the eldest member of Agrahara village, she understands the social norms. She gets married at the age of eight, widows at ten, her mother -in-law and father-in-law has died when she is fifteen and before she turns twenty her parents has also died. These tragic incidents make her life miserable and moreover people of Agrahara call her ill-omen. Garudacharya's father has taken custody of her little property and after his death Garudacharya is custodian of her property. Lakshmi's own miserable condition makes her rebel towards these societal norms. People of Agrahara now realize that her behaviour and actions are abnormal. She oftenly shouts:

You villain! A golden man like Naranappa became an outcaste got himself a harlot. You fellows call yourself Brahmins, you sit there and don't want to take out a dead man's body. Where has your Brahmanism gone, you rascals! In this Agrahara, in all my born days, have I seen a body kept

uncremated all night? Not once. The times are rotten. Brahmanism is in ruins p.43.

Lakshmi sees some people near the Naranappa's house. They were friends of Naranappa, who were co-actors in his stage show. They come to take part in the cremation but finding nobody they become afraid and run away. Lakshmiddevamma shivers with terror and cries, Naranappa's ghost, Naranappa's ghost!

Chandri is waiting for the verdict of Praneshacharya without having proper food and sleep. Her ten years companionship with Naranappa was not due to money or sexual pleasure rather she was emotionally attached to him. Her only aim now is proper funeral done by any of the Brahmin hands. Not only Chandri is worried but Praneshacharya is also in search of proper solution of this dilemma. He has much confusion, first, he is afraid of admitting that the Book of Dharma has no proper solution of this, secondly, people will question him of his knowledge on this issue. As a Brahmin his primary aim is to protect his Dharma.

As the time passes dead body starts stinking and children and other people around Naranappa's house are living in the smell in the summer time. Women of Agrahara now start cursing Naranappa, they are started to scare of Naranappa's ghost because it can harm their children. Everybody is in tension and children are counting the numbers of rates near Naranappa's house. Naranappa's roaming ghost, bad smell of the dead body and young Brahmins' hunger compel them to think about the cremation. Meanwhile, the poor Chandri is afraid of facing the angry Brahmins of Agrahara, so she sits near the temple, waiting for the verdict of Praneshacharya. Almost all the Brahmins of Agrahara are half-dead with hunger and desperately waiting for the decision. Suddenly they see many vultures flying in the sky and picking the dead rats. Superstition is the conviction that something shall happen owing to the causes utterly disproportionate to the event. Although coming of vultures for their food is a quite natural thing but people of Agrahara are scared by thinking that the soul of dead Naranappa is ready to take revenge. Even Sitadevi and Anasuya request their husbands: “Let the gold go to hell! Why do we need other people's property? Please take out the body and get to the rites. Naranappa's spirit is calling out these vultures (p.61). Inside the Maruti temple Praneshacharya requests God to show a proper solution of this problem but unable to find any proper solution he returns back to his house. It is dark in the forest it is Chandri, who is following Praneshacharya. He under temptation makes relationship with her. The relationship with Chandri transforms Praneshacharya completely. He realizes that he has lost all moral rights to continue as the religious leader of the Agrahara. Novel's first part ends and every shade of human beings come outside in different-different way.

In section two of the novel, Chandri's role present as a lover and a kind human being. Her first priority is to cremate the dead body. She is afraid of the orphaned and unprotected dead body of Naranappa, so her humanity compels her to take a quick decision to cremate the body. She firstly goes to Sheshappa, a cart man. He already knows everything what has happened in Agrahara. He refuses to give any kind of help to Chandri because he dares not to go against

Brahmins and does not want to stop his regular occupation. Finally, in distress she goes to Naranappa's Muslim friend, Ahmad Bari, with the help of him she keeps the dead body in cart, moves to cremation ground and performs the rites. Now she decides to leave the place forever. This action shows that she is a woman of great determination and tremendous courage. Though she is overburdened due to rigid rules of Brahmin but in spite of it, she cremates her husband and displays her courage in front of everyone.

On the other hand, no one knows the news about cremation; Praneshacharya is still without answer and decides to accept his sin. Praneshacharya suggests the Brahmins to go to other Brahmins to take the decision of their own. The entire villagers decide to go to Kaimara for suggestion on this issue. In Kaimara, Subbannacharya, foremost priest is also not able to give solution on this matter. Meanwhile, the condition of Brahmins is so miserable due to hunger that they are falling down due to weakness. Next morning, while returning from Kaimara, Dasacharya and Padmanabhacharya become sick. Praneshacharya is staying alone in the Agrahara and unfortunately his ailing wife is dead, so he goes to Kaimara to gather people of Agrahara to cremate the dead body of his wife. Meantime, the Brahmins of neighbouring village, Parijatapura, come to know everything except that the dead body has already been cremated by Chandri. Manjappa, a villager and rich businessman of Parijatapura is disturbed with the series of deaths occurring one after another in Agrahara. First Naranappa, then wife of Praneshacharya, and then Desacharya have also died. He comes to a conclusion that Agrahara is facing an epidemic. He is an intelligent person and calculates that dying of rats shows that a calamity has reached in Agrahara in the form of an epidemic i.e. 'plague'. Tayinadu newspaper proclaims that 'plague in Shivamoge'. Manjappa efficiently performs his duties towards Agrahara people, informs municipality and calls doctors for remedies.

In the third and last section, the novel entangles in dualities and conflicts of Praneshacharya's thoughts. His relation with Chandri, indecisiveness over the issue of Naranappa's cremation and his wife's death makes him overburdened and restless. His extreme desire goes to Chandri but he thinks: "If I went now in search of her and enjoyed her, I would be fully responsible for my act, wouldn't I p.97? In confusion he finds no solution to protect his own reputation and to save Brahminism. He remembers his childhood friend Mahabala. Their childhood friendship breaks because of a prostitute with whom Mahabala has illegal relations. Praneshacharya took a vow: "I will not go the way of the fallen Mahabala, I'll be his opposite" p.100. Whenever Praneshacharya thinks about Mahabala, he remembers Naranappa and from Naranappa to his wilfulness. In order to forget Mahabala, he tries to win a victory over Naranappa, but every time faces defeat. In grief and frustration he goes to another place for peace. On the way, he meets Putta, a half-caste from Malera, who guides him for car-festival at Melige. Putta unceremoniously incites him to break one rule after another and succeeds. Praneshacharya accepts it as part of his resettlement. He is alone because there is no place where he can peacefully. It shows clearly: "that he didn't have the skills to live in this

world of sharp and cruel feelings. One part of lust is tenderness, the other part a demonic will. Cowardice returned" p.117. Praneshacharya wants to leave Melige but Putta requests him to stay and introduces Padmavati, a half-caste Malera woman. She is a beautiful and charming lady. On seeing her, Praneshacharya remembers his encounter with Chandri. Padmavati, a prostitute figure, who seduces the ascetic Brahmin, stirs in him fires of passion. But Praneshacharya remembers his duties towards his people and decides to go back to Agrahara. In repentance he decides to tell everything to his people, "not a confession of wrongs done. Not a repentance for sins committed. Just the plain truth. My truth. The truth of my inner life" p.132. Now he asks himself:

"Even if I leave everything behind, the community clings to me, asking me to fulfill the Brahmin to born to. It is not easy to free oneself of this...shall I tell him I've sinned and lost the merits of penance? That I am no Brahmin? Or just the simple truth?" p.96

In Agrahara the Brahmins decide to cremate the dead body of Naranappa. They arrange everything for the rites and wait for Praneshacharya. Although they have no knowledge that Praneshacharya has left the village. Till now no one knows that the dead body is already cremated. Meanwhile, when Praneshacharya hears about the announcement of plague in Shivamoge by Municipality, he suddenly realizes his duties as a human being and decides to return to Agrahara.

Praneshacharya understands his duty for Agrahara not only in terms of religion and morality but also to protect the customs and traditions. Customs are traditional activity or festivity, in particular circumstances and particular time because it is regarded as the right thing to do. Customs are essential to the life of a society and it preserves our culture and transfers it to the succeeding generations. It brings people together and develops social relationships among people. Now, Praneshacharya realizes that one must be aware for outward things as well as for inward things of life. The inward movements are desires, motives, anxiety, fears and sorrows, etc. Morality is relied upon conscience and deals to the whole of man's life. Praneshacharya's physical relationship with Chandri makes him realise that morality is concerned with good and evil and he thinks what future he leads to be. Will it be like Naranappa or like Mahabala? Confessing and considering his own deeds and misdeeds, Praneshacharya starts his journey to Agrahara. Now, his life has become pathetic and entangled into problems, so for him the case of Naranappa's funeral now becomes secondary.

Although he is unfaithful to his spouses i.e. (his wife Bhagirathi) but ultimately his struggle to save his religion and morality overshadows his inner guilt towards the society and his own wife. The novel eventually ends up without any fixed determination but with the vigorous wall of norms, customs, traditions and foremost religion with superstitions are standing like 'Himalaya' in front of an individual like Praneshacharya. A knowledgeable person like Praneshacharya is not able to answer his inner self and, on the other side, Chandri, a marginalised woman,

completes her duties and responsibilities towards the person with whom she lived for ten years. Chandri represents herself a courageous woman and foremost a good human being.

References

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