

RELIGIOUS DOGMATISM AND MORAL DEGENERATION IN U. R. ANANTHAMURTHY'S SAMSKARA - A RITE FOR A DEAD MAN

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ABSTRACT

In India, religion impacts on each and every sphere of human life such as social interactions, education, marriage, politics and even eating habits of people. The caste system of Hindu religion, which has been supported by religious texts like Bagwatgita, Rig-Veda and Manusmriti etc., has an immense influence on the lives of Indian people on day-to-day basis. Majority of Hindus believe in practicing religious rituals in their routine activities that are well-supported by religious discourses. Today, in spite of democratization, modernism and scientific development, Indians are becoming more and more conscious about their religion, caste and community in their personal and social conduct. The paper attempts to find out the hollowness in the religious mandates and dynamic religious progression depicted in major characters in U.R. Ananthamurthy's Samskara-A Rite for a Dead Man (1965). The characters in the novel are extremely caste conscious in their corporal and spiritual conduct. The novel depicts a vivid and realistic picture of a typical south Indian village which fell into ignorance, superstitions and orthodox beliefs. Samskarais a religious novel which throws light on the futility and fickleness in the obscurantist Brahminical approach towards human life and theological reflections on the fundamental human problems.

Keywords: Religion, Agrahara, Samskara, Rites, Caste System, Moksha, Pollution,

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INTRODUCTION:

In India, the caste system of Hindu religion, which has been supported by religious texts like *Bagwatgita*, *Rig-Veda* and *Manusmriti*, has an immense influence on the lives of Indian people on day-to-day basis. Majority of Hindus believe in practicing religious rituals in their routine activities that are well-supported by religious discourses. Today, in spite of democratization, modernism and scientific development, Indians are becoming more and more conscious about their religion, caste and community in their personal and social conduct. Most of the political parties play caste or religious card to remain in power. The best example of this could be given in the growing intolerance in India among Indians, which could be summed up in the 2015 annual report of US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). It says "incidents of religiously-motivated and communal violence reportedly have increased for three consecutive years". Against the backdrop of the recent tragic incidents in India such as "violent communal attacks, forced conversions, 'Ghar Wapsi' campaigns, hate speeches, Dadri lynching incident in which a Muslim man, Mohammad Iqlakh was brutally killed at Dadri in Gautam Budh Nagar district of UP for alleged "beef consumption or cow slaughter", a well-known journalist of a daily newspaper, *Standard Business*, Bharat Bhushan rightly commented upon the current deplorable social and political conditions:

"What we are witnessing is not just Hindu rituals in the public sphere but their use to create a predominantly Hindutva public sphere that marginalizes others. Rituals are mere instruments." (11)

Even today, it has been observed and found that such government sponsored cultural imperialism has been operative and all pervasive everywhere. This type of moral absolutism as a system operates on different planes. On one hand such religious fundamentalists create cultural dominance, and forces people from their own community and others to internalize their personal

beliefs and religious values in guise of discharging religious duty. On other hand, such politically patronized cultural structure has been systematically used to marginalize voiceless subalterns, and keep them away from the power structure through certain religious rites and rituals. As a result, the voiceless subalterns get subjected to political and economic exploitation, physical violence and mental traumatization from the dominance of powerful religious clouts in the society.

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 unmasks 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. V. S. Naipaul, a prominent writer of today's time, aptly described Anantmurthy's portrayal of Hindu society in his controversial book, *India: A wounded Civilization* (1977):

Knowingly or unknowingly, Anantamurthy has portrayed a barbaric civilization, where the books, the laws, are buttressed by magic, and where a too elaborate social organization is unquickered by intellect or creativity (except to the self in its climb to salvation). (109)

In order to contextualize V.S. Naipaul's above comment on *Samskara*, one has to understand the stark reality of notorious social system, *Chaturvarnyavavastha*, which is the foundation for Hindu society. Anantamurthy's *Samskara* is a touchstone in the socially-conscious literature. The novel is a classic case study for the manifestation of ill-effects of Hindu dogmatism and caste system in the society. It depicts a vivid picture of Hindu society wherein the prominence of Brahmins in the society is shown and lower-caste Dalits are pushed to the bottom of social hierarchy. In the novel, Brahmins are placed at the highest pedestal, and considered to be the spiritual guides, teachers, and most respected members in the Hindu society, whereas Dalits are supposed to perform menial duties and serve all in the society. Brahmins, in

the novel, have been shown to be indulging in all immoral practices. *Samskara* presents a miniaturized world of Indian Hindu Society. It highlights the complexities of caste system which is based on the *Chaturvaranadharm* of Vedas. The reference of inception of *Chaturvarnyavavastha* in Hindu society can be found in the religious text book like, *PurushaSukta*, the ninetieth hymn of the tenth mandala of the Rig Veda:

The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made.

His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was produced.

(ब्राह्मणो॑ऽस्य॒मुख॑मासीत्।बा॒हू॑रा॒ज॒न्यः॑कृतः।

ऊ॒रु॒तद॑स्य॒यद्वै॑श्यः।प॒द्भ्या॑गं॒शु॒द्रो॑अजायतः ॥12॥)

(Griffith, 569, English Translation)

These verses prescribe a set of divine codes for the constitution of Society. It is believed that there are four Varnas, i.e., Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. In these codes, Purusha is shown to be a symbolic and personified figure for the universe. He has been given human attributes, which form the constitution of Society in the form of four Varnas. This suggests that the Brahmin was his mouth, the Kshatriya formed his arms, the Vaishyas were from his thighs, and the Shudra came from his feet. This notion of *Varnavyavastha* also appears in other religious texts like, Bhagwat Gita the Apastamba Dharma Sutra, Vashishtha Dharma Sutra, the Vishnu Purana, the Harivansha Purana, the Satpatha Brahmin and the Manu Smriti etc.

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. One of the greatest intellectuals of modern time, Dr. Ambedkar came down heavily on the divisive caste system, and appealed masses to denounce *Vedic literature* which supports such type of human degradation in the name of religion. In his well-known speech, *Annihilation of Caste* which was written for the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore, Dr. Ambedkar criticized the disintegrated feature of Hindu society:

There is no Hindu consciousness of kind. In every Hindu the consciousness that exists is the consciousness of his caste. That is the reason why the Hindus cannot be said to form a society or a nation. There are however many Indians whose patriotism does not permit them to admit that Indians are not a nation, that they are only an amorphous mass of people. (50)

Dr. Ambedkar describes Hindu society as ‘an amorphous mass of people’ who are not religious by the principles of morality or human values, but they are caste-conscious groups hankering for their selfish goals. Like Dr. Ambedkar, Ananthamurthy attempts to present a realistic picture of the caste-conscious disintegrated society. It depicts how Hindu obscurantism has failed to create a society which values humanity and egalitarian principles, like *Liberty*, *Equality* and *Fraternity*. Ananthamurthy as a rational Brahmin, portrays the hollowness in the religious claims of conservative Brahmins who believe that all human problems could be solved by performing unscientific rituals.

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 Durbasapura 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.

Like Archbishop Thomas Becket of Canterbury Cathedral, a central character of *Murder in the Cathedral*, a verse drama by T. S. Eliot, who knowingly prefers to get murdered with a goal of getting an eternal divine grace when he had a chance of escaping from the tragic situation, Praneshacharya considers his self-chosen martyrdom in his marriage with an invalid wife as ‘the sacrificial alter’ or a stepping stone for achieving salvation, and repressing his sensual desires. 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.

Ananthamurthy uses Narayanappa as a spokesperson for his mission to irradiate religious orthodoxy. Ananthmurthy, in his personal life, was very popular for his scathing attack on religious extremism of rightwing political parties in India. Some of the direct glimpses of his concern about religious degeneration could be seen in the novel. The dead Naryanappa is shown to be more dreadful and threatening to the conservative Brahmins in the novel. He exposes the evil side of caste-conscious Brahmins, and rebels against Brahmin authority posing a direct threat to their existence. He threw challenge to conservative Brahmins in agrahara, when he was alive, after being threatened of excommunication:

"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. After being approached by Praneshacharya for his anti-brahmanical

behavior, Naryanappa held Praneshacharya responsible for degeneration of Brahmins in the agrahara, and made a mockery of his spiritual discourses:

‘Once, in an agrahara, there lived a very holy Achari-that is, once upon a time. His wife was always ill and he didn't know what it was to have pleasure with a woman-but his lustre, his fame had travelled far and wide to many towns. The other brahmins in the agrahara were awful sinners-they knew every kind of sin, sins of gluttony, sins of avarice, love of gold. But then, this Achari's terrific virtue covered up all their sins; so they sinned some more. As the Achari's virtue grew, so did the sins of everyone else in the agrahara’.(22)

Through Narayanappa, Ananthamurthy expresses his concern for hollow religious dogmatism and degeneration of moral values in Brahmins who use religion as an instrument for fulfilling their selfish motives. 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.

Ananthamurthy brings the issues of physical and mental exploitation of common people to the notice of readers through this novel. After successfully dissuading Garuda's son, Shyama and Lakashman's son-in-law, Shripati from their traditional Brahmin Dharma through his influence of 'Hedonist School', Narayanappa gave an indication to all Brahmins that their religious law books and rites don't work anymore in today's time. It has been found that the Brahmins in the novel follow these rituals not for their religious faith but for their selfish motives:

All twelve months of the year, they had vows to keep; they had calls for ritual meals occasioned by deaths, weddings, young boys' initiations. On big festival days, like the day of the annual temple celebrations or the death-anniversary of

the Great Commentator, there would be a feast in the monastery thirty miles away. The brahmins' lives ran smoothly in this annual cycle of appointments.(16)

The moot problem in the novel surfaces when Chandri makes announcement of Narayanappa's death from Plague in the opening part of the novel. Narayanappa was a rebel who undermined the importance of Brahmins and their obscurantism when he was alive. Now his death polluted the entire Brahmin community which prevented all Brahmins from eating food. It is a belief in Hindus that no person should eat a morsel of food till the corpse of dead person gets a proper last rite. It is a religious entanglement for all Brahmins who were not ready to accept Narayanappa as a Brahmin for his anti-brahmanical behaviour. No kinsman of Narayanappa was ready to perform the last rites, and bear the expenses of his cremation unless his brahmanhood gets established. Brahmins of agrahara requested Praneshacharya to find out a solution on the problem. In order to resolve the problem and perform a respectful funeral of his lover, Chandri comes forward and offers her gold ornaments like, bracelets, chain and bangles to whoever performs the cremation with a proper rite. The religious tension in the novel has aptly been described by K.V. Tirukamalesh in his article, '*The Context of Samskara*':

The dilemma is that although he revolted against brahminism, Narayanappa is a brahmin by birth, and therefore his body should be cremated according to brahmanic customs; but he is also an outcaste to brahmanism and therefore no brahmin agree to cremate his body and conduct the death ceremony.(77)

The problem here is with the conservative Madhava brahmins, who believe in strict 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 Parijatapura 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.'(18)

After realizing the failure of Praneshacharaya 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 outcastes' 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. The heightened tone of Ananthamurthy's concern for moral degeneration of brahman community is very-well echoed in the screaming imprecations of an old woman at Garuda, a relative of Naranappa and a Madhava Brahmin from Durubaspura, Lakshamidevamma:

'You villain! A golden man like Naranappa became an outcaste, got himself a harlot. You fellows call yourselves brahmins, you sit there and don't want to take out a dead man's body. Where has your brahmnism gone, you rascals! Don't you know you'll fall into the lowest hell reserved for outcastes and perish there? In

this aghara, in all my born days, have I seen a body kept uncremated all night? Not once. Rama, Rama, the times are rotten, rotten. Brahminism is in ruins. Why don't you shave your heads and become Muslims, why do you need to be brahmins, you!' (37)

Through *Lakshamidevamma*, the writer exposes the opportunism of Madhava brahmins in the novel. Most of the Brahmins of Durbaspura are shown to be criticizing Naranappa for demeaning brahminhood. But in reality, all Madhava Brahmins, including Praneshacharya, are guilty of moral degradation of Brahmin community. They are grappled with evil tendencies like, jealousy, lust, anger, gluttony and adultery. Lakshamidevamma blames greedy Garuda for grabbing her property and jewelry unlawfully, and cheating Naranappa's father. She feels very disturbed to see gross violation of Naranappa's death body by his kinsmen in the name of religion. She suspects and curses them for their immoral behavior.

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 dogma, 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.

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