



Caste Prejudices in U.R.Ananthamurthy's Samskara- A Rite for a Dead Man

Abstract:

The current paper refers to the conflict i.e. Brahmin v/s low caste which has been prevalent since the time immemorial in Indian society. The Indian society has been largely structured in a very complex way, based on religious ideologies. The roots of such a system have been deeply rooted in the Indian psyche. U.R.Ananthamurthy's chief concern in Samskara is to give a direct reference to religion which sounds like sensitive and controversial topic. Ananthamurthy brings before his readers an individual in this novel, with boundaries of caste- living according to tough rules of community and finely a sickly sweet life, restricted by customs and rules of society, the loading of tradition now overwhelming a caste which is unable to adapt.

Key Words: Religion, casteism, Discrimination.

Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man (1965) by U.R.Ananthamurthy is a novel set in a small village of Karnataka, representing a fake world of high caste Brahmins. Dejecting the beauty of life, their attitude towards life is based upon false, duplicitous and exaggerated thoughts. An unexpected question when arises in their present, they find answer in their holy books; therefore the contemporary questions remain unanswered. Majority of the people are very money-oriented that the hunger of a share of the dead man's assets is primary, while his cremation is the secondary one. The original meanings of the Vedas is eliminated and overlooked. The circle of 'karma' is still and it moves where, it breaks the fake boundaries of the unfilled rituals of casteism. The Brahmins, belonging to high caste perform, a ritual called 'samskara' for the purification of soul, but here the question occurs – Are they themselves pure? Every human activity is governed by caste and creed, starting from birth to death. The grim reality is that death can't also prevent the dominance and continuation of these rituals.

The word 'samskara' - which is also a title, is in the centre to this novel. One meaning of this word is the refinement of soul; it is to make a human holy, and it is a decontamination of the dead body. The name of that village in the novel is Durvasapura and Naranappa is an effective threat to the Brahmin community of this village, as he strictly abhors the traditional Brahmin values, cherished by all.

Ananthamurthy in this religious novel Samskara shows a declination of a Brahmin colony in the village of Karnataka. The story of the novel contains two-facedness of the high-caste Brahmin community and its deterioration with the course of time. Brahminism is now lost somewhere in the confusing web of rituals and rites, destitute of their inherent functions, which provide them meaning and life. This decline is the real force for religious rites which lead the Brahmin to village debate whether they ought to take part in Naranappa's funeral- who born as Brahmin but all his life has acted against the community. As A.K. Ramanujan examine:

The opening event is death, an anti-brahminical Brahmin's death- and it brings in its wake a plague, many deaths, questions without answer, old answers that don't fit for the new questions... (Ananthamurthy, Samskara)

Praneshacharya- a scrupulous erudite of holy books and the 'Crest-Jewel of Vedic learning' (Samskara, 6) even discover himself unable to find a solution to this problem throughout the novel. Actually, making efforts to find an explanation for this problem, Praneshacharya himself becomes a person with the contradictory path of life, which leads him to his own samskara in a sense of refinement from his fractional vision of life to his comprehensive perception.

Samskara tells the story of Naranappa, who is born in a Brahmin family but revolted against his own community and its samskaras. Their 'refinement of spirit' hasn't taken home by him. They are jealous of all banned pleasures of Naranappa. They adore gold, betray widows and orphans. They went to Praneshacharya for an answer, a totally opposite personality to Naranappa, who is struck totally into pure Brahminical ideas, believes in purity of soul, self-sacrifice; expand the light of knowledge etc. Seeking answer for this problem from virtuous Monkey- god Maruti, Praneshacharya incongruously turned into an individual of the opposite path of life. Acharya left everything: living life differing from his own principles; he sleeps with Chandri- Naranappa's mistress from low-caste. He now has a thought in mind that he has no right to evaluate Naranappa or give any advice to the Brahmins of Durvasapura.

In the opening of the novel, there is a description of Praneshacharya's routine, his service to his invalid wife. He thinks that he is living in a heaven by providing humble service to his wife, because he thinks this self-sacrifice as a big virtue:

He bathed Bhagirathi's body, a dried- up wasted peapod, and wrapped a fresh sari around it; then he offered food and flowers to gods as he did every day, put the flowers in her hair, and gave her holy water. She touched his feet, he blessed her. (Samskara, 1)

They both don't have much conversation, as he never talks to her much; because it's his routine for the last twenty years. Sometimes, Bhagirathi says that she is a burden upon him, but Praneshacharya laughs and says that it is the way of god to him, giving him salvation:

The lord definitely means to test him on his way to salvation; that's why He has given him a Brahmin birth this time and set him up in this kind of family. The Acharya is filled with pleasure and a sense of worth as sweet as the fivefold 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. (Samskara, 2)

Totally unaware by feminine beauty and liveliness of the life, he was incarcerated by the boundaries of caste and creed. He was ignorant about the factor of feminine grace which he finds later in Chandri -the low-caste mistress of Naranappa. However Praneshacharya gets disturbed by the voice of Chandri, when he had finished his routine. He has a thought in mind that if he talks to a woman like her; he has to take a bath, as he would be polluted by conversing with her. In spite of this thought, he asked Chandri about her problem, and she replied with some sobs that Naranappa is now no more. This raises a great problem among the Brahmin of Durvasapura. As per their Brahmin law, the members of the community cannot take their meal before Naranappa's cremation and as Naranappa was an anti-Brahmin, they cannot cremate his dead body. The Acharya examines this problem and says: "Naranappa's death rites have to be done: that's problem one. He has no children. Someone should do it: that's problem two" (Samskara, 4)

Everyone in Durvasapura was against to Naranappa because of his bad deeds, as he regularly slept with Chandri, he ate whatever she cooked. Many other Acharyas of the village like Garudacharya and Lakshmana raised a question that Is Naranappa a Brahmin at all? Everyone tries to escape from the responsibility of Naranappa's last rituals. Every Brahmin believes that if they offer the cremation of Naranappa, their own souls would be contaminated .Praneshacharya knows that this is not a simple question. He says:

... it's a deep question – I have no clear answer. For one thing he may have rejected brahminhood, but brahminhood never left him. No one ever excommunicated him officially. He didn't die an outcast; so he remains a Brahmin in his death. Only another Brahmin has any right to touch his body...(Samskara, 9)

Praneshacharya has full authority to ex-communicate Naranappa, but he couldn't do it. His three pupils became the pupils of Naranappa because of his talents. Lakshamana's son-in-law Sripati and Garudacharya's son Shyama became Naranappa's pupils. At this even Praneshacharya gave him a warning that it is not good for you. "Don't separate Sripati from his wife." (Samskara, 21)When Naranappa provoked Shyama to join his company, Praneshacharya tried his best to persuade him not to ruin the life of Sripati and his family. At that remark of Acharya, Naranappa says:

Let's see who wins in the end – you or me. I'll destroy brahminism, I certainly will. My only sorrow is that there's no brahminism really left to destroy in this place – except you. Garuda, Lakshamana, Durgabhatta – ahaha – what Brahmins! ... (Samskara, 23)

Many times, Naranappa conversed with Praneshacharya wrathfully that Acharya himself stood answerless at him. His thoughts sometimes are influenced by Naranappa's talks. He questioned about a great sage Parasara to Praneshacharya that he made love with a fisherwoman to put a cloud upon the holy river Ganga. And from this union, a son born named Vyasa- a prophet of the epic Mahabharata. And by explaining these stories of the association of low- caste women and high-caste saints that Naranappa began living with Chandri- a low-caste woman. Naranappa said to Praneshacharya:

You read those lush 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... (Samskara, 25)

When Naranappa was alive, he himself was a problem and now when he is dead, his body has become a big problem for everyone in Durvasapura – Praneshacharya thinks on the cremation of Naranappa. Naranappa was never ex-communicated so his dead body deserves a cremation according to the brahminical rituals. He deserved ex-communication when he was alive but was never because of his inauspicious speech and a soft corner for him in Praneshacharya's heart. Acharya thinks that he will get him back on the right path of life with the help of his own virtue.

The question of Naranappa's cremation turns more complicated when it comes to the matter of money. The lust for money at this point exposes the stingy nature of the Brahmin. The women of this high-caste are not ready that their husbands would offer the last ritual to Naranappa's body, are continuously looking at the gold ornaments on Chandri's body. Their thoughts are really fatal. Here Ananthamurthy

shows a distinction between a low-caste woman and high-caste women of agrahara like Chandri and Belli respectively. Whereas many Brahmin women are shown as pale and infertile, Chandri is a lovable, pious-hearted and gorgeous low-caste woman. Everyone, due to the question of expenses, is not ready to do the last ritual to Naranappa's body. The irony of the situation is the willingness on the part of these people for rituals when Chandri offered all her gold ornaments for Naranappa's last rituals. Being a woman of low-caste, Chandri even knows the greedy nature of these brahmins and that is why she gave her jewelry for the last rituals of Naranappa, which uncovered the lust for money in the minds of these pious brahmins. Those brahmins who were not ready for performing the last rites of Naranappa, are now ready to do it only for the sake of money (gold).

Praneshacharya tried his best for finding the answer for this problem from Maruti- the chaste monkey-god, but he couldn't find any sign or any solution. So he determined to go back home to give his wife her medicines. On his way to his home, in the mid of the jungle, he meets Chandri. She looks more energetic, enchanting and vigorous than the women of Brahmin caste. Chandri wants a child from the Acharya:

Her mother used to say: prostitutes should get pregnant by such holy men.
Such a man was Acharya, he had such looks, virtues; he glowed. But one has to
be lucky to be blessed by such people (Samskara, 46)

Unconsciously, the hidden desires of Praneshacharya get aroused here in the darkness of this night. As Praneshacharya married to an invalid wife, his desires for physical relationship from his wife were suppressed. And now they have found their way in his discussion of Puranas and classics. Now, he becomes conscious of feminine beauty and found it in Chandri- a low-caste woman. It describes that the necessary pleasure of life is found outside Brahminism. Praneshacharya now thinks about Naranappa's real delineation that he himself given on behalf of the place of well-known sages. Praneshacharya realizes a contrast in his existence, when he encounters Chandri.

It is Naranappa's question that re-awakes Praneshacharya, and only because of his description, now Praneshacharya understands the value of physical love. So when he meets Chandri, he acts totally contrary to his character and for the very first time, he encounters the force of sexuality. Now, he understands the liveliness and the true meaning of life. He has a comparison of his barren wife and Chandri in his mind. He thinks that how lively and beautiful Chandri is! Now he wants to leave his position as a leader of his community.

Praneshacharya feels that he has no right to give advice to the members of his community. He confesses before Chandri that he has lost it. If he doesn't have the courage to say anything to them; the next day she must speak out. After this, he will cremate Naranappa's body himself. Praneshacharya who always finds meaning of 'Dharma' in the classics is now looking for Chandri. Before meeting Chandri, he has never experienced the beauty around him but now realizes beauty in everything around him, which he never saw beyond Brahminism.

For the first time his eyes were beginning to see the beautiful and the ugly. He had not so far desired any of the beauty he'd read about in the classics. All earthly fragrance was like the flowers that go only to adorn the god's hair. All female beauty was the beauty of goddess Laxmi, queen and servant of Lord Vishnu. All sexual enjoyment was Krishna's when he stole the bathing cowgirl's

garments, and left them naked in the water. Now he wanted for himself a share of all that (Samskara, 76-77)

Before the confession, Chandri vanished behind closed doors. First she goes to Naranappa's dead body and thinks that this is not her lover Naranappa but only a dead body and a dead body has no boundaries of caste. Praneshacharya wishes that Chandri herself should tell everything to Brahmins in Agrahara; but she is found nowhere. So he told them to do whatever they have in their minds. They should solve this question of Naranappa's cremation by themselves. Now he is relaxed as he has no burden. Now Praneshacharya came to know the reality of life and he has a thought in his mind that till now he was unaware about the wheel of karma. He thinks that now he involves in this wheel and this is a life of 'passion': "... even if he had left desire, desire had not left him" (Samskara, 78)

The Acharya now realizes the worthlessness of religion. He thinks that being a 'Crest- Jewel of Vedic Learning', he was totally unaware of the real meaning of life but being a simple person who made love with a low-caste concubine; he understands it. He has no guilt to make love with Chandri, because through that action, he became aware about the liveliness of life. After knowing all these, he wants to kick away his high caste to live a realistic life. He wants Chandri. He confesses: "Till I touched Chandri I too was a shell." He is now no more interested in his image as a Guru throughout his quest for his new- discovered identity. He invokes Chandri to alleviate him from his past image as a Guru.

Praneshacharya, Chandri and Naranappa are the three important characters here in this novel. Ironically Praneshacharya, who never changed against Naranappa's invitations, now became like Naranappa- his counterpart.

[...] I slept with Chandri. I felt disgust for my wife. I drank coffee in a common shop in a fair. I went to see a cock-fight. I lusted after Padmavati. Even at a time of mourning and pollution, I sat in a temple-line with brahmins and ate a holy feast. I even invited a Malera boy to come into the temple and join me. This is my truth. Not a confession of wrongs done. Not a repentance for sins committed. Just plain truth. My truth. The truth of my inner self. Therefore this is my decision, here! I cut myself off (Samskara, 131)

The Brahmin belong to high-caste, never lived a life without any differences of caste and creed. They have lust and hate always in their minds and never tried to come out of the boundaries of caste. They worshipped the holy Vedas and Puranas, but never understand their true meanings. They are unable to find goodness in low-caste people. For them, it is important to admire the main objects of scriptures but failed to understand the importance of the inner meanings. They are unaware about the real beauty of life. They created the walls of casteism and they themselves became prisoners in them.

Can these lustful and voracious people be called Brahmins? How can they refine Naranappa's soul? Are they themselves pure? Praneshacharya even involved into the karma-wheel and understands the importance and real meanings of those scriptures. He awakens his inner desires and goes beyond the prejudices of caste and creed.

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