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Hypocrisy and Inertia in Brahmins: A Critical Rereading of *Samskara* as a Critique of Caste System in India

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Abstract: U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* (1965) remains a landmark in Indian literature for its searing critique of Brahmin orthodoxy and the caste system. Set in a decaying agrahara, the novel focuses on the internal contradictions, hypocrisies, and moral inertia of the Brahmin community in the face of social and spiritual crisis. This paper revisits *Samskara* as a powerful interrogation of caste privilege, exposing the moral bankruptcy and performative piety of upper-caste elites. Drawing upon the central character Praneshacharya's spiritual dilemma and the community's collective inaction, this study analyzes how Ananthamurthy uses narrative irony, symbolism, and philosophical inquiry to challenge the sanctity of caste-bound identities.

Keywords: Caste, Brahminism. Hypocrisy, Inertia, Purity

The Indian caste system, one of the oldest forms of social stratification, has been a subject of critique by reformers, writers, and activists alike. The four-fold caste system, widely known as Chaturvarna, is a vicious impediment upon the Hindus which compels them to practice untouchability. The system also declares the Brahmins as the purest of all the other varnas. The question of purity and the Brahmins as the supreme varna has been critiqued over the ages. Among the most potent literary critiques is U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*, which deftly explores the inertia and moral duplicity of Brahmins caught in the webs of their own ritualistic orthodoxy. Through the decay of a Brahmin settlement and its inhabitants' inability to respond ethically to a challenge that defies ritual purity, Ananthamurthy exposes the ideological fault lines within caste supremacy. This paper critically examines the novel as a commentary on the caste system, particularly focusing on the hypocrisy and inertia of the Brahmin characters.

The Brahminical worldview, historically grounded in the ideology of purity and pollution, assumes an unassailable moral high ground. However, *Samskara* opens with the death of Naranappa, a defiant Brahmin who renounces the caste codes by living with a low-caste woman and eating meat. Despite being ostracized, he is still a Brahmin by birth. His death triggers a crisis: who will perform his last rites? This question, seemingly ritualistic, reveals a deeper moral stagnation. As G. N. Devy points out, *Anan-*

thamurthy's novel is not merely an indictment of the caste system but a psychological exposure of the Brahmin mind (67). The refusal of the Brahmins to cremate Naranappa stems not from scriptural clarity, but from fear—fear of impurity, social criticism, and inner guilt. At the center of this inertia is Praneshacharya, the "Crest-Jewel of Vedic learning," whose life has been a model of austerity and moral rectitude. His role as the community's spiritual leader underscores the Brahmin ideal. Yet, his spiritual authority is rendered powerless by his own doubts. Praneshacharya's internal crisis begins when he is forced to reckon with the fact that he cannot find a scriptural answer to a real human dilemma. This moment is crucial—it marks the beginning of his moral unmasking and reveals the hollowness of ritual knowledge when disconnected from lived ethical experience. Susheela Punitha has aptly described— *The brahmins of Durvasapura are like mindless sheep, lost and wandering from shepherd to shepherd to be led towards green pastures when all they wanted was the to eat to assuage their hunger* (Kumar and Narendra, 242).

The brahmins adherence to the rigid ritual has added complexity to their life. Leaving a carcass in the agrahara they are not allowed to eat anything. But they merely indulge themselves in meaningless activity and they all become dependent upon Praneshacharya, wait long for his verdict. They even can't decide who is fit to be a brahmin at all and lack enough courage to excommunicate Naranappa as he is a brahmin by birth. Virender Pal has very aptly said —*Brahmins are Slaves to rituals to an extent where they concentrate on nothing but only rituals* (182). Consequently, they feel utterly helpless in performing emergency ethic and bear with the stink of the decomposing body. Ananthamurthy draws a contrast here as he shows the simple lives of the *shudras* having no complex rituals to cremate a deadbody. They simply burn the houses of the deads and it is evident in the text when Chinni says, *Chowda died, his woman too died. We set fire to his hut and finished that too* (Samskara, 48). So, the lives of the Brahmins in the agrahara are full of meaningless activities. The complex rituals of the brahmins lives push them towards an invisible incarceration of their own real self. Their refusal to perform Naranappa's last rites is not merely a religious dilemma—it is a symptom of fear and self-preservation. As Anupama Rao notes, *The Brahmins of Samskara are paralyzed by a dread of the consequences of ethical responsibility* (117). This dread is amplified by their awareness that Naranappa, despite his violations, exposes their own latent desires.

Ananthamurthy in addition also portrays the hypocrisy prevalent in the Brahmin society. No brahmin in the agrahara was ready to perform the death rite but many of them grew rapacious for the gold offered by Chandri, a low caste woman and a prostitute to perform the last rite. This is further clarified in *Samskara* in these lines —

> The brahmins bowed their heads: they were afraid, fearful that the lust for gold might destroy brahmin purity. But in the heart of every

> one of them flashed the question: if some other brahmin should perform the final rite for Naranappa, he might keep his brahminhood and yet put all that gold on his wife's neck (11).

The evil character of the brahmins is further reinforced in the text by the words of Naranappa where he says, *My only sorrow is that there is no brahminism really left to destroy in this place —except you. . . . or that Lakshmana— he loves money so much he'll lick a copper coin of a heap of shit* (22). In contrast Naranappa has always been true to his self. He has never intended to cover up what he really is. He believes in Hedonistic philosophy and enjoys the life fully to its brim and never feels ashamed of having a relationship with a highly seductive woman (prostitute), Chandri. On the other hand, the other brahmins under the veil of *samskara* commits more sin and Naranappa further asserts ... *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* (22). Ananthamurthy ingeniously invigorates the idea that the brahmins are actually more sinners than common human beings.

In the initial stage of the novella Praneshacharya is held high and given a higher stratum as he has been conferred the title, "Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning". He accepts an "invalid wife" just "to uphold the great mercy of god" (Samskara, 17). By doing so he actually represses his own carnal desires and divest himself of any sexual pleasure. Praneshacharya is finally proved a hypocrite when he, at night, inadvertently meets Chandri in isolation and Chandri tactfully enables him to caress her and he enjoys the company of a highly seductive prostitute to gratify his inner desire and hunger. The unconscious desire of the Praneshacharya reaches to its culmination in Ananthamurthy's description—

> It was pitch dark, nothing was visible. As she bent over as if overcome with grief, she didn't quite fall at his feet. Her breast touched his knee. In the vehemence of her stumbling, the buttons on her blouse caught and tore open. . . . Overwhelmed with tender feeling, filled with pity at this brahmin who had perhaps never known the pleasure of woman, helpless at her thought that there was no one but him for her in the Agrahara—overcome, she wept. Praneshacharya, full of compassion, bewildered by the tight hold of a young female not his own, bent forward to bless her with his hands. His bending hand felt her hot breath, her warm tears; his hair rose in a thrill of tenderness and he caressed her loosened hair. The Sanskrit formula of blessing got stuck in his throat. . . . She held his hands tightly and stood up and she pressed them to her breasts now beating away like a pair of doves.
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> 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, and he cried

> out like a child in distress, 'Amma!' (54-55)

It does not preach the end of the brahmin's desire. Though the Brahmins stay aloof from the *shudras* but fall for their physical beauty. Brahmin woman considers sex as a taboo and a mechanism only to procure offsprings. It has nothing to do with physical pleasure. Consequently, their inaction perishes their tenderness and allows them to lose their physical beauty as Shripati describes —*cheek sunken, breast withered, mouth stinking of lentil soup...* (Samskara, 33). He further argues that no brahmin girl is equal to Belli and eulogizes her sexual capability when he inserts, *her thighs are full. When she is with him she twists like a snake coupling with another, writhing in the sands* (Samskara, 33). The thought of enjoying an outcaste girl also churns in the mind of the Crest-Jewel when he sees Belli and Ananthamurthy writes,

> The Acharya's fantasy dragged in all the untouchable girls he'd never thought of; stripped them and looked at them. . . . Now the tamed tiger is leaping out, baring its teeth....
> His hands itched to go caress Belli's breasts, thirsting for new experience. (71-72).

Though girls like Belli are considered untouchable the brahmins still feel sexually aroused by their physical appearances. Anathmurthy probably had witnessed such brahmins in his real life. The outcaste or lower caste women are not "short", "plump" and "round" as brahmin women as they work hard to earn their living. But the statement should not be taken as universal as beauty can be found in brahmin women too. Actually, the idea conveyed is that the incarcerated upbringing of the brahmin girls compels them to bury their desires under their imagined superiority. The lower caste girls are quite free. Pal again interpolates in his essay,

> The impact of these complex rituals and the incarceration of Brahmins in the castle of imagined superiority is more visible with the women. In the world of Brahmins, sex is a taboo, a sin which should be used only for procreation and not for pleasure. Brahmin women cannot enjoy sex, they take it as a sin, while the lower caste women do not feel any such inhibitions. (185)

The narrative strategy denies the reader a clear moral resolution. Instead, it confronts us with ambiguity—a deliberate move to emphasize that moral clarity cannot emerge from caste-based certainties. As Meenakshi Mukherjee asserts, *The novel challenges both the religious rigidity and the secular reader's desire for closure* (88). The brahmins deliberately misinterprets the religious scriptures just to maintain their superiority. Brahmins believe that every action is to be dedicated to God and God has created each and every object in this entire universe as written in the religious scriptures. The statement itself erases the question of untouchability as Pal writes, *when every action is to be dedicated to God then how can a job be menial. So the whole idea of untouchability crumbles and caste system gets demolished on the correct interpretation of the texts* (187). In ancient time there

was a caste mobility and fluidity but the brahmins for their selfish motives has made it rigid.

Chandri, a lower caste woman becomes the ideal character in the novel as she remains true to herself. She sacrifices her gold in order to get Naranappa cremated and later when the problem remains unresolved, she performs the death rite of Naranappa by the help of his muslim friend. Keeping the words of her mother in mind she encounters a sexual intercourse with the holy-man, Praneshacharya. By flipping the other side of the coin, we get the protagonist of the novel who falls from grace when he finds a highly seductive woman though she belongs to lower caste around him. Ankush Mahajan in his essay, *Caste Prejudice in U.R Ananthamurthy's Samskara— A Rite for a Dead Man* writes, *The novel Samskara is an ideal example of the performance of tradition, caste system, class conflict and the lust for physical relations* (113). *Samskara* reminds us that the problem is not merely structural but deeply psychological. As long as caste is internalized as moral superiority, true reform remains elusive. Ananthamurthy's critique is thus not just against tradition, but against the intellectual laziness that sustains it.

Samskara is not a simple critique of Brahminism; it is a profound exploration of the human condition imprisoned by social roles. It exposes the moral hypocrisy of those who preach purity while practicing exclusion, and it critiques the inertia that masquerades as wisdom. By focusing on the failure of brahmins to act ethically in the face of a death, Ananthamurthy dismantles the spiritual legitimacy of caste. His message is clear: moral courage, not ritual purity, is the measure of ethical living. Praneshacharya's transformation, though incomplete, offers a glimmer of hope—a movement from orthodoxy to introspection. The novella, in this way, becomes not just a literary work, but a philosophical challenge to India's deeply entrenched caste consciousness.

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