



U. R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man as a Satire*

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Abstract

U. R. Anantha Murthy is known as a Kannada novelist, short story writer, poet and playwright. His full name is Udupai Rajagopala Acharya Anantha Murthy. He served as Vice Chancellor of Gandhi University, Kottayam. Several communities live in India. Brahmin community is one of them. His book *Samskara* is a religious novella about a decaying Brahmin colony in a South Indian village (Karnataka). This paper attempts to read *Samskara* as satire. The religious orthodoxy has also been satirised in the narrative. It is a satire on social hypocrisy and religious hypocrisy. Murthy has highlighted the problems of greed and hypocrisy. The religious leaders have also been satirised for their activities.

Key words: Brahminism, rituals, religious satire, hypocrisy, greed, religion

Satire is form of literature that exposes the vices, follies and foibles of an individual, institution or society with an aim to reform. It attacks on hypocrisy, greed, bigotry, falling of moral values etc. The novella *Samskara* was published originally in Kannada in 1965. It has been translated in to English as *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* by A. K. Ramanujan and published in 1976. The English translated book is dedicated to M.G. Krishnamurti. It has been made in to a film in Kannada language. The main theme of the narrative is death of Naranappa and the complications connected with the issue of his cremation. It is divided into three sections. First section is subdivided into ten chapters, second section contains six chapters and third section consists of two chapters. It is set in the village Durvasapura and deals with the life of the Brahmins living there. It exposes the conservative life style of the Kannada Brahmins and attacks the traditional and orthodox principles of Hindu religion. It presents a precise division of caste system in the villages Durvasapura, Parijatapura, Kundapura and Kaimara in Shivamogge, a district of Karnataka. The majority of people who live in Durvasapura are Madhava brahmins. They adhere to the rites and regulations of Madhava, which was established in the twelfth century by Madhvacharya. They are orthodox, and Praneshacharya and other brahmins like Dasacharya, Garunacharya and Lakshmanacharya of the agrahara (the brahmin village) are the representatives of this orthodoxy. It is a satire on greed and hypocrisy. Anantha Murthy attacks caste system and instable roots of Brahminism through the character of Naranappa who illustrates the lives of great Brahmins who had disobeyed their orthodoxy because they fell in the charms of women. Murthy gives the example of Parashara, Vishvamitra and Adi Shankaracharya:

Naranappa's mischief revels in mythological reminders and precedents. Didn't Parashara the great ascetic put a cloud on the holy Ganges as the fisherwoman ferried him across, take her in the boat, bless her body with perpetual fragrance? Out of this union of sage and fishwife came Vyasa the seer, compiler of the Vedas and epic poet of the *Mahabharata*. Didn't Vishvamitra the warrior-sage succumb to the celestial Menaka and lose all his accumulated powers? He once ate even dog-meat to survive a famine and became the proverbial example of 'emergency ethics' (*apaddharma*). And didn't Shankara, the celibate philosopher, use his yogic powers to enter a dead king's body, to experience sex, to qualify for a debate on the subject, with a woman? (*Samskara*, 123)

Naranappa is one of the major characters of the text. He is the centre of conversation of other characters throughout the narrative. Earlier he was a pure Madhava Brahmin of Durvasapura but later he became corrupt and opposed Brahminism and orthodoxy. He abandoned his lawful wife and kept a prostitute named Chandri as his wife. He used to eat mutton and fish with Muslims residents of his village. He also showed disrespect to Hindu god and goddesses. After his death, none of his relatives and villagers agrees to perform his funeral rites. They show hate for him and express that they have no relation with him. They hesitate to perform his cremation because they think that they will lose their Brahminhood by doing this act because Naranappa was a reprobate and corrupt Brahmin. Durgabhata, a Smart Brahmin, says that they have to decide that Naranappa is a Brahmin or not because he consumed wine and meat. He says, "But our dilemma is something else: is Naranappa, who drank liquor and ate meat, who threw the holy stone into the river, is he a Brahmin or not? Yet it's not at all right, I agree, to keep a dead Brahmin's body waiting, uncremated" (*Samskara*, 18). Garudacharya who is full of orthodox says:

It's but right we should go by the ancient Law Books. Acharya, you are our greatest scholar, your word is vedic gospel to us. Give us the word, we'll do it. Between Naranappa and me, it's true, there is a bond of kinship going back several generations. But, as you know, his father and I fought over that orchard and went to court. After his father's death, I appealed to the guru at the Dharmasthala monastery. He decreed in my favour. Yet Naranappa defied it, even god's word – what do you say? – So we swore we'd have nothing between us for generations to come, nothing, no exchange of words, no wedding, no rite, no meal, no hospitality. That's what we swore – what do you say... (*Samskara*, 6)

Lakshmana is husband of the sister of Naranappa's late wife. He also says that he has no relation with Naranappa because he is responsible for death of the sister of his wife Anasuya and he did not attend the funeral ceremony of his sister-in-law. He is angry at him because he accepted Chandri, a low-caste woman:

Naranappa abandoned his lawful wife after trying the wedding-string round her neck. You may condone even that... He went and got mixed up with some woman. My wife's sister became hysterical and died: he didn't even come to the funeral rites. You may condone even that; but he didn't care to observe the death anniversaries of his own father and mother. I'm not the sort who would hide anything about him just because he was my close relative. He was my wife's uncle's son. We tolerated things and sheltered him in our lap as long as we could. (*Samskara*, 8)

But when Chandri offers her golden jewellery including gold chain, bracelet and bangles for the Naranappa's funeral ceremony and places them before Praneshacharya, both Garudacharya and Lakshmana agree for his funeral rites so that they may get the jewellery. Dasacharya suggests that the Brahmins of Parijatapura should be invited for the funeral ceremony of Naranappa because they were friends. Even they ate and drank together. Lakshmana's wife Anasuya thinks that if the Brahmins of Parijatapura are ready for his funeral rite, they will get all the golden jewellery. Praneshacharya advises them to be patient and inform the Brahmins of Parijatapura:

The question of gold ornaments came up again. If the Parijatapura people chose to perform the rites, shouldn't the gold go to them? Lakshmana's wife, Anasuya, could not bear the thought of her sister's rightful jewels falling into the hands of some hybrid Brahmin in the next village...

Wearily Praneshacharya consoled them.

'Be patient. What's before us is a dead body waiting to be cremated. About the gold – leave the decision to me. First send someone to Parijatapura with the news. If they decide by themselves to perform

the rites, letan them... I'll look into Manu and other texts. I'll see if there's a way out of Naranappa this dilemma.' (*Samskara*,14)

When Garudacharya visits Praneshacharya's house and he is informed that the people of Parijatapura are ready for the cremation of Naranappa as per the religious Books, he asks Praneshacharya about solution according to Manu's Law. He tries to flatter him so that he may get permission for the funeral rite. He wants to hear only yes in his favour, "The Acharya felt disgust rising in him at Garuna's attempts to flatter and cajole him. This man wasn't really interested in what was in the Books. All the fellow wanted to hear was: 'Yes you can do it.' So this Garuna is now raising him, the Acharya, to the skies, for a 'Yes' that would silence all fault-finding tongues. The motive: gold" (*Samskara*,26-27).

Garudacharya gives several logics to convince the Acharya because he wants permission from the Acharya to perform funeral rites. He says that the supreme dharma of a person is saving of a life and to save one's life, he may eat cow's flesh or dog-meat. He says, "Haven't you yourself said, there's such a thing as a dharma, a rule for emergencies? Didn't you – what – once suggest that – if a man's life depended on it we could say? What do you say – a story you told us once – Sage Vishvamitra, when the earth was famine-stricken, found hunger unbearable, and ate dog-meat, because the supreme dharma is the saving of a life?" (*Samskara*,27).

Anasuya laments on the death of Naranappa, the son of her maternal uncle. She says that her sister and Naranappa's wife died because of Chandri. Garuda had black magic against Naranappa and driven him out of his mind. If a lowcaste man is permitted to pick up the dead body of her brother, she shall die of shame. If Garudacharya is allowed to do the funeral rite, his wife Sitadevi will get all the ornaments. She suggests her husband to perform Naranappa's cremation. Lakshmanacharya tries to get permission for death-rite by giving his logic that only he has this right because Naranappa is the husband of his wife's sister, "Lakshmana gasped. 'Narayana, Narayana'. He wiped out the sweat off his body, closed his eyes, and said, 'Acharya-re, if the Books have no objection, I've none either. Naranappa is my wife's sister's husband, isn't he, after all? If you don't mind, no one but me has the right to perform the death-rites'" (*Samskara*,30).

Both Garuda and Lakshmana are not interested in the death-rites of Naranappa because earlier they had denied performing it, but later they agree for it just to get the golden ornaments. Anantha Murthy has attacked on their hypocrisy and greed. Garuda and Lakshmana are hypocritical who lack the confidence to speak openly for fear of losing their Brahmins purity. Sitadevi and Anasuya, their spouses, also have their eye on Chandri's golden ornaments. They fear that the ornaments will be given to Parijatapura people if they agree to perform the death - rites of Naranappa. Garuda and Lakshmana start fighting over the golden jewellery like two dogs fighting over a bone without any sense of shame. Garuda tells Lakshmana that it is his right to perform the funeral rites but the golden jewellery must be submitted to the Court or given to him. He claims his right on the ornaments. Praneshacharya is worried about the solution of the problem of death-rites as well as the distribution of golden ornaments, "Praneshacharya felt disturbed. Even if the problem of the dead man's rites should be solved, the problem of gold ornaments would not be easy to solve. Minute by minute his own responsibilities seemed to grow. Naranappa's challenge was growing, growing enormous like God Trivikrama who started out as a dwarf and ended up measuring the cosmos with his giant feet" (*Samskara*,31).

Dasacharya highlights two other problems – to be hungry until the dead body is cremated in the agrahara and the stink of dead body. He says that there must be special provision in the case of emergency. He wants that the dead body must be cremated as soon as possible because he is not able to control his hunger. He lives in the village to satisfy his hunger. He loses his patience for postponing Naranappa's cremation. He suggests for

cremating the body immediately. He says that he has no interest in the ornaments and the ornaments must be utilized by offering a crown to God Hanuman. Praneshacharya says, “According to the ancient custom, until the body is properly removed there can be no worship, no bathing, no prayers, no food, nothing. And because he was not excommunicated, no one but a Brahmin can touch his body” (*Samskara*, 12).

Murthy reveals how Brahmins uphold untouchability by avoiding touch or speaking with Dalits in order to preserve their purity. He is the most learned and respected Brahmin in Durvasapura because he studied scriptures in Kashi. He is religious leader of the agrahara. Praneshacharya considers himself a pure Brahmin and religious person. When Chandri comes to his house to inform him of Narayanappa's death, he is more concerned about his purity and says that if he talks Chandri, a low-caste woman, he will be polluted and he will have to take bath again before his meal, “Chandri was Naranappa's concubine. If the Acharya talked to her, he would be polluted; he would have to bathe again before his meal” (*Samskara*, 4). But when he meets Chandri in the forest and she embraces him, he is not polluted. He has physical relation with her:

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. As his hand played on her hair, Chandri's intensity doubled...

Touching full breasts he had never touched, Praneshacharya felt faint. As in a dream, he pressed them... The Acharya's hunger, so far unconscious, suddenly raged, and he cried out like a child in distress, 'Amina!' Chandri leaned him against her breasts, took the plantains out of her lap, peeled them and fed them to him. Then she took off her sari, spread it on the ground, and lay on it hugging Praneshacharya close to her, weeping, flowing in helpless tears. (*Samskara*, 55)

This shows hypocrisy of such Brahmins who avoid physical contact with Dalits in the society to maintain their purity but they have no problem sleeping with Dalit women. Naranappa serves as a spokesperson for Anantha Murthy's effort to challenge religious orthodoxy. He challenges Brahmin authority and reveals the darker side of caste-conscious Brahmins. When he was alive, he challenged the conservative Brahmins of agrahara after receiving a threat 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” (*Samskara*, 12). All the conservative Brahmins in the agrahara hate him because of his revolutionary behaviour and his disobedience of the laws of Brahmins. Naranappa ridiculed Praneshacharya's spiritual teachings and blamed him for the decline of Brahmins in the agrahara:

'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'...

'Now, you explicate it, Acharya-re— didn't the Achari himself corrupt the brahminism of the place? Did he or didn't he? That's why our elders always said: read the Vedas, read the Puranas, but don't try to interpret them. Acharya-re, you are the one who's studied in Kashi—you tell me, who ruined brahminism?' (*Samskara*, 22-23)

Shankarayya, the priest of Parijatapura, suggests that Naranappa's dead body deserves to be cremated properly because he was a Brahmin. Even on the death of a snake, proper rites are performed. But Durgabhata, Garudacharya, Lashkmanacharya and Praneshacharya postpone his funeral ceremony because of their

conservative thinking. Shankarayya says, “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. Don’t you think so?”(*Samskara*,18)? As a result of the delay of the funeral rites of the dead body, it begins to stink. Dasacharya’s wife says, “‘Yes, it’s true it stinks.’ And tapped her husband and said, ‘Look, that stench. It’s summer time, the dead body has rotted. It’s stinking up the whole agrahara’”(Samskara,44).

To conclude, it may be said that Anantha Murthy conveys his concerns about Brahmins who use religion as a means of pursuing their own self-interests and false religious rigidity through Narayanappa. Maximum Brahmins of Durvasapura including Praneshacharya, Garudacharya, Lakshmanacharya etc. are hypocrite. Naryanappa and Praneshacharya have illicit relationship with Chandri and Garudacharya’s son-in-law Shripati has illicit relationship with a low-caste widow Belli. All of them are responsible for the decline of agrahara. Although the novella was written in 1965, many issues revealed in it are relevant at present.

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