



Research Paper

Sanskara as a Window of Brahmin Orthodoxy

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ABSTRACT:

The worldly societies are victims of class demarcation and religious extremism. *Sanskara* a novel written by U R Ananthamurthy, translated by A K Ramanujan, has very well portrayed the class bifurcations of the Indian Society. Ananthamurthy, himself being a Brahmin took a bold step in exposing the hypocrisy of the Brahmin community in the country. The class consciousness is something injected deep into the Indian psyche. There is a complex structure for the Indian society as the foundation is built upon the religious ideologies. This paper focuses more on the Brahmin orthodoxy as portrayed by Murthy in his novel *Sanskara*. He focuses on the concept of ethics and morals as preached by the Hindu tradition often called the Dharma, the superstitions and even the gender bias as portrayed both inside and outside the Brahmin community.

KEY WORDS: Class bifurcation, Brahmin orthodoxy, dharma, gender bias.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Sanskara - A Rite for a Dead Man, a novel by U R Ananthamurthy was first published in Kannada language in the year of 1965. This work presents the Indian society with a place reserved for the high-class Brahmin society- their values and attitudes in life based on the hypocritical notions which they have practised for long years. When it got published, the book created a trigger in the Indian society. Ananda Murthy, being a brahmin himself exposed the beliefs of the community. It questioned the traditional cultural set up of the highest strata of the society. *Sanskara* is considered to be one of the major works belonging to the modernist movement in the Kannada literature, commonly called as the Navya.

The setting of the story in the backdrop of a street in Durvasapura and the Brahmin community called the Madhavas are talked of in particular. Madhavas are those with extreme traditional mindset who follows the rules and regulations established by the religion. The dominating characters of the play are Naranappa, Praneshacharya and Chandri. The story revolves around the incident of the death of a brahmin named Naranappa. This is the beginning of the novel. There is a dilemma faced in conducting the last rites of Naranappa. Then he introduces the protagonist of the novel called Praneshacharya. He is asked to solve the situation dealing with Naranappa's cremation. The story then revolves around the life events associated with Praneshacharya as he gets involved in the cremation.

The novel opens with the author introducing Praneshacharya, 'a crest jewel of Vedanta'. He returned to Durvasapura after completing his Vedic education from Varanasi. Being the most learnt among the Madhava community of Durvasapura he became their leader. The only aim that he had was attaining 'moksha' or liberation. To attain the same, he marries an 'invalid woman' named Bhagirathi. Serving her was his way of practising self-sacrifice and hence he remains celibate.

Through this particular work, Anantha Murthy speaks of his own perception regarding man's existential plight. *Sanskara* has been adapted into a movie by Girish Karnad, who played the character of Praneshacharya. The film won President's Gold Medal as the Best Film at National Film Festival in the year 1970. The novel was translated into English by A K Ramanujan in the year 1976. The novel got translated into several other Indian languages and foreign languages thus extending and breaking the global barriers. This book became a landmark of Indian Literature. It is considered as 'a classic of modern fiction.'

II. SAMSKARA:AN OUTLINE

The story opens with the death of Naranappa. He was a brahmin by birth but, he engaged in several immoral practises thus violating the rules of Brahminism. He ate non vegetarian food, caught fishes from the temple pond, kept company with the Muslims, drank alcohol, threw the sacred stone- 'saligrama' into the pond and he had been living with Chandri, his concubine. He openly challenged the brahmin orthodoxy in the 'agrahara' of Durvasapura. He returned from Shivamogge and died of high fever. Chandri comes to Praneshacharya seeking his advice on how the last rites should be carried out. The news of his death spread so fast that the other brahmins gathered at Praneshacharya's house to know what was going to happen. The brahmins cannot cook and eat in their house until the dead body is ritualistically disposed. As Naranappa defied the brahmin-hood none of them were willing to carry out the last rites nor were ready to bear the funerary expenses.

Chandri offers her gold ornaments to meet the expenses. Both Garudacharya and Lakshmanacharya becomes ready to perform Naranappa's last rites but only in exchange of Chandri's gold. Praneshacharya looks into the sacred books to find a solution for the issue. But he could find none. Things would have been easy if Naranappa was excommunicated from the society when he was alive. This was also once planned. It was then he threatened them saying he would convert into Islam and would degrade the Agrahara. Other brahmins visited Parijatapura looking for Naranappa's friends. Finally, Manjayya, a rich merchant agreed on to take up the expenses. Praneshacharya goes to the Maruthy temple to seek a divine intervention on this matter. Before he took his leave, Praneshacharya handed over Chandri back her ornaments.

He couldn't get any answers even from the temple. He left the temple exhausted and that was when he came across Chandri. She falls at his feet and her firm breasts touched his feet and it ignited him with extreme passion. He loses his well-preserved celibacy. He wakes up in the middle of the night in the forest to find himself lying on Chandri's lap. He is filled with extreme guilt and says that he defied the customs so that he is no longer apt to lead the Madhavas of Durvasapura. He says, "I am qualified to perform samskaras only for myself." Chandri decides to arrange the funeral rites by herself because she didn't want Praneshacharya to get exposed before the other brahmins. Chandri could not stand the sight of Naranappa's rotting corpse either. Finally, with the help of a Muslim friend, Ahmad Bari, she manages to cremate Naranappa alone. After this Chandri packs her belongings and she leaves to Kundapura, where she once lived. Praneshacharya left for Durvasapura, but the guilt never left him. He was a changed person now. He experienced a feeling of having fallen into a deep pit while attending his wife Bhagirathi. After spending a night with Chandri, now looking at his wife who is all skinny and flat he realised that the feelings which he had suppressed all these years has plunged back into him.

The villagers came again regarding the issue of cremation he told them that he is not some kind of a super human and that he is "charged with all attachments and aversions of workday humanity." He told the villagers that they are free to do what they want with the corpse. The brahmins were quite surprised by this behaviour of Praneshacharya. They left for Kaimara to get an advice for this issue from Subbanacharya. He orders them to cremate the body and deposit the gold in the mutt as he dies without an heir. Praneshacharya goes for a swim and then suddenly he remembers the moments he spent with his mother. Then one by one almost all his lost desires of boyhood came back to him. He then rushes to the spot in the forest where he shared the moment with Chandri. "Here I am. Take me. Hold me," he calls out. He then returns back home to find Bhagirathi whose condition worsened by the raging plague in the Agrahara. She dies in his arms. He cremates her and leaves for a journey to re-discover himself.

During this journey he meets a man named Putta who never keeps his mouth shut. He follows him everywhere like "the sin of his previous birth." Putta takes him to the temple festival at Melige. The serpentine curves of a girl acrobat remind Praneshacharya of Chandri. Again, he meets a woman named Padmavati. Her charms almost work on him. But he decides to go back to Durvasapura and tell the truth to the fellow brahmins. Putta was keen on accompanying him and meet his friend Naranappa. Praneshacharya could not tell Putta that Naranappa was dead because he believed that telling him would only create more complications. A passing bullock cart offers to take one of them to Durvasapura. Putta offers the cart to Acharya who hops in the cart with an anxious expression.

The author left it for the imagination of the readers to conclude regarding what will happen in Durvasapura here after. The readers could decide whether Acharya owns up his guilt or not. In the novel there is conflict between reality and appearance and, tradition and defiance of tradition. A K Ramanujan suggests that "the novel ends, but does not conclude. What is suggested is a movement and not a closure as Acharya's initiation is an anxious return, a waiting on threshold, his questions seem to find no restful answers."

III. BRAHMIN ORTHODOXY AS PORTRAYED IN SAMSKARA.

The novel is all about the traditional Brahminical society, their beliefs and superstitions. The story revolves around Naranappa's death. Naranappa, being a brahmin violated each and every belief of Brahminism. The story revolves around the events associated with his crematory practises. The novelist has made use of a serious tone and also, he made sure to include humour, irony and satire to expose the hypocritical thoughts and practises of the high caste. Brahmins belong to the highest ranking of the four social classes. According to the Purusha Sukta, all the social classes emerged from the body of Purusha. Brahmins are said to emerge from the mouth of Purusha, also, it was from the mouth where the scholars believed that the world was formed. Thus, Brahmins were placed at the highest level. He begins with the news of Naranappa's death. "The news of death spread like a fire to the other ten houses of the Agrahara. Doors and windows were shut with children inside. By god's grace, no Brahmin has yet eaten. Not a human soul there felt a pang at Naranappa's death, not even women and children. Still in everyone's heart an obscure fear, an unclean anxiety. Alive, Naranappa was an enemy; dead, a preventer of meals; as a corpse, a problem, a nuisance." (Murthy, 3)

The other brahmins who came up to Praneshacharya asked him to give advice regarding what was to be done with Naranappa's body. It was a Brahminical custom that none of the brahmins are supposed to cook or eat when someone belonging to their community meets death. None of them were ready to cremate him stating that he defied all brahmin laws when was alive. They tear apart Naranappa's reputation stating that he degraded the brahmin community. One of the main reasons which they stated was that he lived with a low-class concubine named Chandri. No body volunteered to cremate him but they wanted to somehow cremate him since all they were concerned was about when could they have meals.

The attitude of these brahmins change suddenly when Chandri, who was a low caste prostitute offered them with jewels. This clearly shows the irony in what they preach and what they practise. They were the same group of people who were totally against Naranappa and criticised him. But now, they are ready to compromise the same brahmin rules they talked about for the sake of money. Again, they were extremely superstitious. The entire village of Durvasapura is struck by a plague. The villagers consider the plague as an after effect of not cremating the body of Naranappa.

Next considering the protagonist, Praneshacharya, a duality is seen in his Brahminical character. He is described as the 'crest jewel of Vedanta'. He married Bhagirathi at the age of sixteen. She was an 'invalid woman'. Acharya has been serving her for the past twenty years. He considered it as an action of self-sacrifice. He believed that serving Bhagirathi over his entire lifetime would help him achieve his goal of attaining moksha or liberation but, there is an instance mentioned in the novel where he refuses to touch her when she has her menstrual cycle. This is a Hindu belief that women are impure during this phase and touching them would make a person to be labelled as 'polluted.' As the story proceeds, we see the protagonist go astray from following his Brahminical ideals and he is seen with the concubine Chandri. He even gave up his long- preserved celibacy. This act of his serving Bhagirathi is considered as practising the concept of 'Dharma' as preached in the Hindu tradition. This concept is all about the duty, religious merit and ethics to be followed. But we see a conflict between traditions and their breach.

Another factor which throws light on the Brahmin orthodoxy in the novel is their superstitious beliefs. One of the best quoted examples is of the character of Lakshmiddevamma, an old woman. She got married at the age of eight, widowed at ten, her in-laws died when she was just fifteen. The fellow brahmins believed that she was responsible for all the deaths happening around her. They believed that she was cursed. As a result of which she was always an 'outcast' in her own community. Also, her being a woman added up more to her being moved towards the periphery in her own caste. The author also throws light on the patriarchal domination in the Brahminical society.

When it comes to the portrayal of women the duality in the brahmin perception is evident. All of them were against Naranappa for living with Chandri who being a concubine was also a woman of low-caste. Everybody feels shame on her and said that a look towards her would pollute them. Again, we see in the novel where the Brahmin men are seen comparing the bodies of their wives with bodies of low-caste women. They say that their wives, women of the upper caste in general, have 'sunken eyes', 'hollow cheeks' and their 'breasts gag and fall'. By all these they meant to simply convey the fact that they find their wives unattractive. Also, those who first refused to cremate Naranappa in the beginning became ever ready to do the same when Chandri offered her jewels in return. With money in front, there is no class consciousness bothering them.

Another orthodox viewpoint was that the women are responsible to their husbands once they are married off. To substantiate the same, we can consider the case of Putta's wife. She is a victim of domestic violence and unhappy marriage. Putta does not allow her to go visit her parents and the reason that he states is that he cannot bear the expenses of her journey. Once women are married off, they are meant to leave their parents and serve their husbands and this was the duty assigned to them as per the tradition.

IV. CONCLUSION

The entire story is built upon the class demarcation set up in the society. It shows how the society in India was, since changes are happening right now in the social structures. Speaking of the title, *Samskara A Rite for a Dead Man*, is a symbol of the Indian culture. It also stands for both ritual and refinement. The author wants to convey to the readers that all who are a part of the system of varnas are involved in refining themselves and the society as a whole by involving in the roles assigned to them as per this hierarchical structure. Naranappa was rejected by the Madhava Brahmin community of Durvasapura stating that he was 'immoral' in his deeds. Praneshacharya is portrayed as the 'ideal brahmin' in the text. But his actions make the readers question the purity he holds. All the other brahmins in their action of questioning Naranappa exposes the dirt that they carry within them. The conflict within them regarding the tradition and ideals they follow and preach are exposed in front of the readers. In the end we see Acharya's indulgence with Chandri made him think more regarding the meaning of life and made him gain a refined passage (*samskara*) for himself. This class demarcation is not simply portrayed as a concept but a living soul of the novel which directs the plot to go forward throughout until the end.

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