

# Burden of the Past: U. R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*

SATISH C. AIKANT

Ever since its first publication in 1965 Anantha Murthy's novel *Samskara* has generated considerable debate. Several critics, in particular the Kannada critics, perceived the novel as a criticism of Hinduism and a frontal attack on Brahminic dogma. There were others who felt uneasy about the modernistic perspective of the author on a social reality which was merely culture-specific. Murthy, they alleged, was trying to universalise a personal experience - the crisis faced by a brahmin priest, which was by no stretch of imagination a universal existential angst. Ramanujan's first translation of it in English, a decade later (1976), served two purposes: it enlarged the readership of the novel and suggested a new way of reading it - foregrounding as he did in his 'Afterword,' the allegorical dimension of the novel which had been obscured by the acrimonious debates in the Kannada literary circles. The critical consensus which has emerged over the years is that to consider *Samskara* merely as a realistic novel dealing with a socio-historic problem would, is simplistic, and a reductive enterprise.

It has also been argued that Anantha Murthy in the writing of this novel was trying to come to terms with his own complex realities rooted in the Madhava Brahmin traditions of rural Karnataka. 'The writing itself can be viewed as a 'samskara,' a rite of expiation, or *prayaschita*, to atone for the oppressive practices of Brahminism when its orthodoxies were being interrogated in the reformist climate of the 1930s and 40s.'<sup>1</sup> Seen in this light, it becomes imperative to locate Anantha Murthy's relationship to his brahminism, his choice of Kannada as his creative medium, despite his professional involvement in English literature, and more importantly, the need to use the contemporary experimental mode of modernism to examine existentialist conflicts in the traditional rural society of Karnataka.

Murthy, of course, was exposed through his education and outlook to the influences of Western modes of

perception such as Modernism, Existentialism, Liberalism and Marxism. And the unease he felt with the codified and rigid Hindu society that he knew only too well is expressed in his novels, in particular, *Samskara* and *Bharathiputra*.

In a paper titled 'Search for an identity - A Viewpoint of a Kannada Writer' Anantha Murthy articulates the problems of contemporary writing in the Indian languages. Writing in Kannada which has a literary history dating back to a thousand years, Murthy was trying to reflect on the newly emerging identity of an Indian writer faced by conflicting legacy of a cultural tradition with the present day reality. The orthodox writers or the so called 'insiders' were those who 'grew a tuft, wore caste marks, chewed betel, and more often than not, came from a rural background. Along with their Gandhian idealism, their sensibilities bore the distinctive features of their castes and regions and they wrote as if the English education, they receive was inconsequential.'<sup>2</sup> Murthy himself later agreed that his categorical description was too simplistic but the essential point being made was that while he admires the insiders' in-depth knowledge of Indian tradition he is forced to reject 'their celebratory attitude towards Indian traditionalism.'<sup>3</sup> They were restricted to their use of conservative aesthetic modes while the modern writer was more inventive and took the liberty of experimenting with new techniques and forms. What was, however, essential was a certain 'rootedness' into one's past if not exactly into the classical Indian tradition.

One may argue that this concept of 'rootedness' within the Indian tradition is a rather problematic issue. The insider/outsider conflict needs to be addressed at a much broader level, and for someone like Murthy writing in the post independence era, the issue is a complex one. While admitting to western influences, and the need to break out of a traditionalist mould, he also acknowledges

---

Satish C. Aikant is Professor of English at H.N.B. Garhwal University, Pauri

the fact that the language a writer uses automatically ensures its own compulsions on him and his work. A language like Kannada is kept alive and vibrant, not just by its huge body of literary works, but also by its oral tradition as well as the folklore of the illiterate rural masses. The resultant language, 'created by the peculiar congruence of indigenously and Sanskrit classical traditions, folk traditions and now the impact of spreading Western education,'<sup>4</sup> is no longer limited to its classical preserves, but moves on to become a part of a living tradition which is constantly redefined and renegotiated. A writer while he is engaged in the creative process not only further shapes the language but is also shaped by it. He thus becomes very much a part of the living tradition of that language, that is, an insider. By virtue of the fact that all his experiences, his past and his present coalesce into an immediate contemporary reality, his identity is constituted anew and he no longer remains an 'outsider' to the tradition. He, indeed, acquires a composite Indian identity. It is interesting as it is significant that *Samskara*, originally written in Kannada, when translated into English by A. K. Ramanujan, not only resulted in wider readership, but it also began to be related to the discourse of modernity, even though its plot and characterisation were firmly rooted in the realities of a regional and traditional culture.

Hinduism with its rigid brahminical codes, not only informs the theological background of the text but is also central to the problematic of the novel. Appropriation of the brahminical superiority amongst the Hindu castes goes back to the creation of the universe, according to the *Rig Veda*. Brahminical hegemony was maintained by a strict adherence to customs and rituals formulated, so as to ensure the absolute untainted purity of the caste, and this could only be done by adhering to a scrupulous code of conduct. Notions of purity and pollution formed the mainstay of the caste system.

Murthy's Brahmin agrahara in *Samskara* is defined by its rigidity, lack of spontaneity and growth. It has an unenlightened Brahmin population who are mostly driven by greed and superstition, but it also has a man like Praneshacharya who rises above the rest. As a 'critical insider' Murthy can expose the limitations of the orthodox caste and class defined identity, without going as far as V. S. Naipaul, who, as an outsider, found *Samskara* as nothing but stressing upon the obscurantism of 'a barbaric civilization.'<sup>5</sup> Murthy's socialist leanings perhaps account for his negative attitude towards the ossified community of Brahmins and, like Jagannatha in *Bharathiputra*, his attempt is to dismantle the caste system, in order to ensure equality and dignity to all sections of society, which could only be done by breaking the barriers which

separated them. *Samskara* is seen as an attempt to 'give convincing form to unformulated conflicts, helping to re-ritualise human endeavours which have been rigidified by ritualism.'<sup>6</sup> Murthy initiates a contestation of what constitutes Brahminism through Praneshacharya, the spiritual leader of the agrahara Durvasapura.

Critics such as S. Nagarajan find the author's attitude to Brahminism somewhat ambiguous. Their question essentially is this - is the critique of Hinduism, the author's or the protagonist's? The question has been repeatedly raised in the context of this novel but we must understand that a certain degree of ambivalence is what characterises a 'modern' novel. Such ambivalence is perhaps ingrained in modernity itself. Nagarajan's reading is that though the initial portrayal of Praneshacharya is imbued with irony, the irony gradually recedes as the protagonist's spiritual progress takes final shape. This suggests that 'we begin with a figure who is set up as the central character of the novel but who becomes the central consciousness of the novel as the novel develops. This shift in the point of view makes it more than likely that the repudiation of Brahminism is the author's with the character serving as his agent in this respect.'<sup>7</sup> As an individual whose identity is defined by his caste, the separation of the 'essential self' from the societal role, an act easy enough for its modernist author, may be quite inconceivable for Praneshacharya. It is precisely because he is rooted both in terms of social space and identity in his Brahmin status that the multiple complexities of the social and individual crises could not have moved him away from his essential self.

Praneshacharya's brahminism extends beyond the normal parameters and his self-enforced celibacy is a manifestation of his excessive zeal for purity. According to Hindu belief, life is divided into four 'ashrams' which are essential parts of a pre-ordained 'dharma'- 'brahmacharya,' 'grahasta,' 'vanaprastha' and 'sanyasa.' In keeping with this tradition a man acquires learning in the brahmacharya ashrama, and in the early part of grahastya, he enjoys *artha* and *kama*. It is only when he has experienced both sensuality along with other material and spiritual pursuits that he is ready to withdraw from his worldly duties. 'In accordance with the precepts of the *Veda* and the *Smriti*, the householder is declared to be superior to all of them: for he supports the other three. As all rivers, both great and small, find a resting place in the ocean, even so men of all orders find protection with householders.'<sup>8</sup> It is therefore maintained that, a 'man's neglect of as fundamental an aspect of life as sensuality (*kama*) leaves him incomplete in the fulfilment of dharma.'<sup>9</sup> Praneshacharya's decision to wilfully forego the householder stage is thus not in keeping with the

traditional Hindu way of life. This decision to test his ability to renounce more than what dharma enjoins, almost amounts to hubris. Even Louis Dumont in an essay on world renunciation posits the caste society of the householder as a holistic universe against the renouncer as the individual outside of society.<sup>10</sup> Despite all his virtue, the Acharya suffers from the limitation of not adhering completely to the dharma of a brahmin priest who also happens to be a householder.

A brief summary of the plot may be useful before the text is analysed further. The novel is divided into three parts. The first part introduces the static agrahara and its rigid ritual-bound life now troubled by the death of one renegade inhabitant, Naranappa. The second part is set in the forest, away from the stultifying structure of society where Praneshacharya has re-birth through a sexual encounter. The third part is a journey, a common motif in the allegorical mode because during a journey a man's destiny is fluid, undefined by the collective norms of specific communities.

The novel begins with the death of Naranappa, a brahmin of the Durvasapura agrahara, who throughout his life had desecrated his brahminism. The brahmins of the agrahara now face an unprecedented dilemma - who should perform the last rites or 'samskara' for Naranappa? The fundamental question is, should one who rejected his brahminism in life, be treated as a brahmin in death? The question occupies centre stage as no daily functions can be performed as long as there is an un-cremated body in the agrahara. No one can eat in this unclean state. Since Naranappa, though not excommunicated, was a non-practicing brahmin, so that whoever performs the rites may be contaminated by the act. Whereas the structures of that brahminic world seem to decompose as inevitably as Naraappa's corpse rotting in the heat, the inner self of the hero, as we shall see, unfolds.

As the problem is being discussed, we gain revealing insights into the character of the various people involved. Besides the dominant wish to maintain their ritual purity and orthodox superiority the behaviour of the brahmins expresses envy, jealousy, greed and even deceit. At first, nobody wants to compromise himself by cremating the dubious corpse. But when Chandri, with whom Naranappa had been living, offers her gold ornaments to cover the costs, one after the other the brahmins overcome their hesitation and secretly sneak into the Acharya's house to put forward their claims. The brahmins are greedy, gluttonous, mean-spirited: they love gold, betray orphans and widows; and even though they cannot follow their dharma properly, they look

down on Naranappa because he openly lived his anti-brahminical ways and yet are jealous of his every forbidden pleasure.

For Praneshacharya, the 'Crest- Jewel of Vedic Learning,' as he is called, Naranappa's death has raised questions for his community that cannot be ignored but which have no easy answers. His challenge to Praneshacharya teases and torments him and leads to a series of crises that go far beyond Praneshacharya's control, in metaphysical terms.

To get out of his predicament Praneshacharya turns to the scriptures for an answer, but despite his learning and wisdom he fails to get any direction that would help resolve the issue. In despair he leaves for the temple of Maruti, in the forest, in quest of a solution. Meanwhile the uncremated body begins to rot and a stench permeates the village. He waits, in vain, for a flower to fall from the Maruti's idol, a 'sign' of divine intercession. In utter dejection Praneshacharya starts to walk back toward the village.

Crossing the forest, he chances upon Chandri, the mistress of the deceased, who has all the while been waiting nearby for the Acharya's announcement of the god's decision. Persecuted and despised by the other brahmin families of the village, she sees Praneshacharya as her only ally and hope. But when he appears before her, helpless and sad, she is overcome by compassion and tenderness for him. She falls at his feet. When he is about to bless her, Chandri touches him unintentionally. The situation undergoes a sudden change, unleashing emotions which are triggered by Chandri's touch. The blessing the Acharya was to utter in Sanskrit sticks in his throat. Instead, he starts caressing her. The touch of this woman leads to a kind of breakdown. He suddenly becomes aware of his emotional and physical hunger and desperately shouts 'Amma.' In the arms of Chandri, who supports him and feeds him bananas, he turns into a child. Then they embrace each other.

The movement of the narrative in the novel is from stasis to a climactic high point i.e., an epiphanic moment opening out to a state of heightened consciousness, that no longer accepts a prescriptive and codified existence. The act of transgression is an indirect consequence of the despair that had set in when Praneshacharya failed to find a solution to the problem which threatens to engulf the agrahara in its wake. When Praneshacharya awakens in Chandri's lap he is no longer the same person. It seems as if 'having exiled 'Kama' from his house and family, he had to find it outside his customary space, in the forest; his sense of dharma had to be undone and remade by it.'<sup>11</sup> Yet the act itself can be perceived as rediscovery or a

're-birth' of Praneshacharya : 'It felt as though he'd turned over and fallen into his childhood, lying in his mother's lap and finding rest there after great fatigue.'<sup>12</sup>

The second part of the novel begins with Praneshacharya's guilt and remorse at his transgression and his breaking of the caste taboos. He returns to the village and, despite his desire to confess about his state of pollution, he is unable to tell the people so. Chandri, meanwhile, gets the body cremated with the help of a Muslim friend. Plague visits the agrahara, and as the brahmins leave the village one after the other, Praneshacharya's wife passes away. Her death provides Praneshacharya a 'freedom from obligation' and he leaves the agrahara after performing her last rites, unable to confront the other brahmins with his act with Chandri. He sets out impulsively on an aimless journey, searching for the direction of his further life.

Praneshacharya's fallibility, seen as an aberration from a conservative perspective, results in social transgression, and yet his breakdown could be seen as all too human. The act, however, has multiple implications in terms of purity / pollution rules. Chandri is a low caste woman; Praneshwaracharya, apart from being a householder and priest, is ritually unclean because Naranappa's body lies un-cremated. The transgression cannot, however, be viewed as an aberration in isolation. In fact it can be seen in terms of the paradigmatic ascetic-erotic dichotomy in Hindu mythology. The contrast between the two is not a conjunction of opposites, but the two are clearly related in symbiotic terms. The mythology of Shiva, for instance, entails both *pravrtti* (action or worldly involvement) and *nivrtti* (quiescence or asceticism). Even Naranappa invokes the classical example of Sage Viswamitra and the celestial nymph Menaka.

The third part of the novel is essentially about Praneshacharya's journey. He is caught between two worlds and his journey is a quest for a new identity, a new consciousness. He meets Putta, a half caste who introduces him to the material world, the world of the body- the fair, the chariot festival at Melige, the food stalls, the cockfights, the lepers etc. Torn between his need to confess his transgression, and to cling onto his priestly reputation, he is unable to arrive at a decision. The novel ends on a note of ambiguity in the fashion of the modernist narrative mode. There is no resolution, and no neat closure to the novel.

The plot is structured around a simple strategy – a question is raised, which gradually turns intractable, and while a possible solution is explored, the question itself does not remain central to the novel but gives rise to several existential issues which are more profound and

metaphysical in nature defying resolution. While the initial question in the novel is about performing the last rites for Naranappa, the issue later shifts to Praneshacharya's inner conflicts that arise because of his transgression of the codes of his brahminical order.

We can observe an interesting dialectic of human qualities here. The majority of the members belonging to the brahmin community, with the exception of Praneshacharya, are unreflective and are selfish, dishonest and corrupt. The dead man, on the other hand, was, while he was alive, a reckless and boisterous brahmin, consorting with Muslims, prostitutes and low-caste men and women, and thus he had been a challenge to his community and its leader. Indeed, there is a long drawn-out contest between the agrahara brahmins and their orthodox ways on the one hand, and Naranappa with his subversive ways on the other. Not only did Naranappa personally challenge the brahmins through his apparently deviant lifestyle but he also successfully lured some of the Acharya's disciples into his own fold. And now, in his death, he has become the source of defiance to the point of plunging the community into crisis. 'Through this crisis, Praneshacharya seems to be moving away from an unreflective relation to his tradition and all its stultifying implications for his society to a greater critical self-consciousness about himself and the way he must think and conduct his life.'<sup>13</sup>

The act of transgression becomes the high point in the narrative dynamics of the text itself, and despite the Acharya's personal anguish, is on the whole seen in the novel in positive, life affirming terms. The act is allegorically very significant because of the space it occurs in - the forest – an area of naturalness, possibly even wilderness, outside the well ordered social space. The forest can have an ambiguous connotation. While it is a site of spontaneity and natural growth of feelings, it is also a dark and mysterious place. In *Samskara* nature is a silent but willing participant in the union between Praneshacharya and Chandri. The act is seen to have been consecrated in a spirit of the celebration of Nature:

Below were green grass smells, wet earth, the wild *vishunukranti*, with its sky- blue flowers and the country sarasaparilla, and the smell of a woman's body- sweat.... In the forest, in the silence, the dark was full of secret whispers. Chirping sounds, from a bush that suddenly appeared outlined like a chariot, a formation of twinkling lightning-bugs. He gazed, he listened, till his eyes were filled with the sights, his ears with the sounds all around him (67).

Praneshacharya's senses become more acute as the smells of grass and wet earth hit his nostrils and the stars became as sharply visible as to a child's eye. After making love

to Chandri he feels as if he has lapsed into his childhood. The description of this semi-conscious state of their mutual surrender is remarkable, as simultaneously, a child becomes a man with his loss of innocence, and a mistress becomes a mother:

The Acharya's hunger, so far unconscious, suddenly rages, and he cried out like a child in distress, 'Ammal!' Chandri leaned 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 (63-64).

There is an ironic contrast between the prematurely old Praneshacharya, burdened with the wisdom of all the scriptures in his head and the responsibility of the moribund agrahara on his shoulders, and the child freshly awakened within, responding to creation. The place of this rebirth is outside the arena of stasis, the agrahara, where time is at a standstill and the smell of wet earth and grass in the forest are allegorically juxtaposed.

As Praneshacharya re-awakens he no longer remains a detached spectator and his initiation into the sexual act begins to urge him to experience something that he had so far only read about in the classics, 'now he wanted for himself a share of all that' (74). He experiences a fulfilment of what he had been denied so far with his invalid wife threatening to become his destiny to forego the pleasures of the flesh. But Chandri defeats that destiny to awaken him to a life that he had not known of. She makes him conscious of his repressed desires and in the process she gives him an insight he couldn't have possibly got on his own. He also suspects that Naranappa had a fuller life; perhaps he knew that all along, but what he has just begun to know, that breaking social taboos and challenging communal orthodoxies does not really violate nature, and that perhaps fear is often a culture's tool of oppression. Praneshacharya even seems to understand for the very first time the full impact of the life of the texts he teaches and expounds. He can even rationalize his union with Chandri by referring it to the chance encounters between sages and Apsaras to the classical age to which normal social restrictions do not apply. In a way, these lend textual sanction and authority to his own behaviour since his immediate references, the Dharmashstras, failed to provide him any guidance in the matter. One can clearly notice in the text of the novel that the act of sexual union outside the socially sanctioned space is not couched in negative terms. Instead it comes through as a positive and regenerative possibility and provides a definitive direction to the overall design of the novel. After the act Praneshacharya's perceptions get so intensified that not only does he recognise beauty but he also begins to be

sensitive to its absence: 'For the first time his eyes were beginning to see the beautiful and the ugly' (76). He begins to look at his wife differently: 'He noticed her sunken breasts, her bulbous nose, her short narrow braid, and they disgusted him' (76).

It is interesting that Chandri, who initiates the Acharya in his act of transgression is a marginalised figure, is positioned outside the space of stratified society. She is a prostitute, and as she belongs to a lower caste, she is not really a part of the brahmin agrahara though she is allowed to maintain a degree of visibility in the village. Yet she stands for the forces of renewal in a twofold way first, as someone related to the heavenly nymphs and transcending human social categories, and, secondly, as a representative of her very caste or social rank she is an epitome of nature. Chandri's body is described in terms of all natural elements like the earth and the river, and like the river Tunga she cannot be defiled or polluted. There is an aura of wholeness, an unconscious self-sufficiency about her, she was 'a natural in pleasure, unaccustomed to self reproach' (68). Moreover, like the *devadasis*, the former temple-dancers, Chandri is a *nityasumangali*, i.e., a perennially auspicious woman. By virtue of her profession she is both outside the structured society as well as is recognized by it. Like the river Tunga she is in the village but unshackled by it. This is how she expresses her kinship to the eternally cleansing flow of river:

If Naranappa's body didn't get the proper rituals, he could become a tormenting ghost. She had enjoyed life with him for ten years. How could she rest till he got a proper funeral? Her heart revolted. It's true, Naranappa had given up **brahminhood. Ate with Muslims.** She too did. But no sin will ever rub off on her. Born to a family of prostitutes, she was an exception to all rules. She was ever-auspicious, daily-wedded, the one without widowhood. How can sin defile a running river? It's good for a drink when a man's thirsty, it's good for a wash when a man's filthy, and it's good for bathing the god's images with; it says Yes to everything, never a No. Like her. Doesn't dry up, doesn't tire. Tunga, river that doesn't dry, doesn't tire (p. 44).

In the juxtaposition of Praneshacharya and Chandri as the confrontation of a brahmin and a shudra, the novel also reflects the political and social ideology of the author. Murthy admits that the ideas of Marx, Gandhi and Lohia had influenced his writings. In a way the brahmin hero represents the modern intellectual and Chandri, who comes from a lower social background challenges the existing order to call for an upheaval for social change.

The representation of all the lower caste women in the novel is marked by a sensuousness that is absent in the brahmin women, who are depicted as frigid, withered with dwarfish braids. Hair is a central motif in the

description of female sexuality. In direct opposition to the dwarfish tight braids of the brahmin women is the lustrous hair associated with Chandri, Belli and Padmavati. The snake imagery in the novel lends itself by extension to this sexual connotation of Padmavati's 'snake braid coming down her shoulder, over her breast'(123) and Chandri's 'black snake like hair coiled in a knot' (15). The unbraided hair of Belli as she emerges from the river -'wearing only a piece below her waist, naked above, waves of hair pouring **over back and face'** (40), is another manifestation of her potent sexuality as also reflected by her body, 'the colour of earth, fertile, ready for seed, warmed by an early sun' (37). Chandri's adornment of her body with flowers is also celebration of this natural acceptance of passion. It is the only house in the village, which has the night-queen bush flowering, 'invading the night like some raging lust, pouring forth its nocturnal fragrance. The agrahara writhed in its hold as in the grip of a magic serpent-binding spell' (15). Indeed, Chandri is the counterpart of the brahmin women of the agrahara who are described as desiccated and rather ugly, in any case deficient, and, on the other hand, a complement to the brahmin male Praneshacharya. Whereas the latter embodies the order and strength of an orthodox culture turned sterile, Chandri stands for life, sensuality, nature and earthiness.

The sterility of the agrahara symbolized by absence of excitement at any births or marriages (not recorded in the narrative) is set against the exuberance of nature, the rising tide in the river Tunga that flows directly behind it. Nature is seen to oppose any form of denial. It cannot be curbed, repressed, or restricted with even man-imposed barriers like the damning of the river Tunga at Kaimara, for in the rainy months, the river waters would threaten the agrahara out of its complacency. The constantly flowing water thus negated the stasis that had set in at Durvasapura.

Despite Praneshacharya's obvious denial of all pleasures, specifically those that were carnal in nature, there is a constant undertone of sexuality in the text. The polarity between restraint and abandonment, asceticism and eroticism, the intellectual and the sensual, the denial and the celebration, brings into focus the allegorical nature of the novel. Naranappa's world of celebration is a Dionysian world, the world of a Lokayatika, as he is a hedonist who holds sensory experience as the ultimate source of knowledge. In contrast, Praneshacharya's is a neat and ordered Apollonian world which of course gets unsettled after his act in the forest. The Acharya's self-willed negation of his physical desires that had manifested itself in the pride within can be seen as a 'tragic flaw' in his character. He came to be perceived as

a larger than life epic hero whose pride in self-denial was his greatest virtue. 'The Lord definitely means to test him on his way to salvation, that's why He's given him a brahmin birth this time...He proudly swells a little at his lot' (2).

However, one might question if in his self-denial Praneshacharya was indeed fulfilling his *ashram* dharma: he had consciously married a disabled woman in order to gain additional religious merit and to obtain salvation more quickly. From the perspective of the traditional social order of the *ashramas* with its four stages of life, he thereby passes over the second stage entirely: that of the householder. Physical love and procreation, the circle of death and birth from which he wishes to escape and which he avoids in the appropriate setting of a marriage, finally catch up with him at a place, in the forest, where he would have abandoned them forever and entered into the next stage of life. In a sexual union he experiences his own rebirth as an overcoming of death. Union turns into a kind of liberation. Under a tree, the classical locus of enlightenment, Chandri, a *shudra* woman releases him from the rigidity of his ritualised life and brings him 'back to the soil.' What is perceived as his transgressive act should indeed have been his duty as a householder in the village. In his supposed fall, therefore, lies his liberation as he opens out to himself and the world around him. He now can see everything in perspective. But the experience also liberates and empowers Chandri. One of the themes that strongly comes through in the novel is that the author contests the portrayal of the subaltern women only as passive victims lacking agency. Chandri, on the other hand, acquires an agency which reverses her perceived role. In the process, she, too, gets empowered. In a way her encounter with Praneshacharya is also a wish fulfilment for her as she recalls what her mother used to say, 'prostitutes should get pregnant by such holy men. Such a man was the Acharya' (46).

At one point, Praneshacharya asks himself whether Naranappa might not even have been ahead of him on the path to salvation: he remembers a story in which 'an arch-sinner, an outcaste, reaches salvation and paradise by merely uttering the name Narayana with his dying breath' (48). Out of despair, Praneshacharya himself resorts to such an 'inverted' devotion himself: when, at the Maruti temple, his songs of love addressed to the god seemingly remain without impact and when the flower does not fall from the idol's head, he tries to move Maruti with songs accusing him of one hundred and one faults.

Praneshacharya had taken up as his life's mission the reform of Naranappa who proved to be a challenge to his own brahminism. But when he attributes the reason for his not supporting the demand for the

excommunication of Naranappa to compassion, he reproaches himself saying, ‘..that’s self-deception. That wasn’t pure pity, it covered a terrible wilfulness. His wilfulness couldn’t give in to Naranappa’s’ (47). Praneshacharya’s hubris inevitably leads to a fall – yet his fall in this context also becomes ascension, to a fuller consciousness. His hubris led him to accrue larger spiritual returns. His penances became his earnings reckoned on the beads of his balsam bead rosary. He is aware that, ‘If such compassion hadn’t worked in him, how could he have tended an ailing wife through the years, uncomplaining, and never once falling for other women? No, no, only compassion had saved his humane brahmin skin’ (48). But that perhaps was his self-image which undergoes metamorphosis after his experience with Chandri: ‘I slept with Chandri. I felt disgust with my wife. I drank coffee in a common shop in a fair. I went to see a cock- fight. I lusted after Padmavati’ (132). These thoughts, however, do not shock or disgust him, as they would if he still clung to his religious orthodoxy. He thinks these thoughts because they are his truth: ‘Not a confession of wrongs done. Not a repentance for sins committed. Just plain truth. My truth. The truth of my inner life. Therefore this is my decision. Through my decision, here! I cut myself off’ (132). He never indulges in any kind of self-recrimination, never considers himself irredeemably lost and fallen. And he knows that he has to carry the burden of responsibility:

Even if I lost control, the responsibility to decide was still mine. Man’s decision is valid only because its possible to lose control, not because it’s easy. We shape ourselves through our choices, bring form and life to this thing we call our person. . . I chose to be something else and lived by it. But suddenly I turned at some turning, I’m not free till I realize that turning is also my act, I’m to answer for it. What happened at the turning?’ (98)

For Praneshacharya, the committing of the ‘transgressive act’ can be seen as a ‘samskara,’ a kind of initiation rite that forces him to question the very concept of the religiosity associated with the entire brahminical tradition, unable to perceive and accommodate anything outside the grooves made by custom, into a new individual acutely aware of his social reality and capable of self- questioning. He also realises that forest, with its natural tranquillity, and the bewildering commercial activity of the market are not polar opposites but are connected at a deeper level.

Ramanujan interprets the transformation of the hero and the form of the novel in terms of a ‘rite de passage’ with the three stages ‘separation, transition, re-incorporation,’ the novel leading only up to the beginning of the third stage: ‘So a *samskara* is not only the subject of

the work but the form as well. The Acharya moves through the three stages – though we see him not entirely into the third stage, but only on its threshold.<sup>14</sup> The journey in the novel is born out of a need to escape and also at a metaphysical level, a need to come to terms with the inchoate stirrings of the individual self.

Plagued by the fear of being recognized when Praneshacharya travels incognito through the forest he undergoes transformation as his perspective shifts more and more to his inner life. In his adventure he is met by a half-caste, Putta, who joins him while he is wandering in the forest and attaches himself to him on his journey (157). Despite Praneshacharya’s weariness and several attempts at shrugging him off on his journey, Putta is determined to stay on. ‘Putta of the Maleras stuck to Praneshacharya like a sin of the past’ (106). Praneshacharya gradually develops a paternal affection for Putta who turns out to be an amiable character.

If the fear of recognition had forced the Acharya away from human habitation he soon learns how difficult, if not impossible, it is to rid himself of his old identity while being confronted with the outside world, to which he exposes himself but which, simultaneously, overpowers him. He realises that, at times, it permits him no longer to be the honoured and respected scholar he used to be, but just some wandering brahmin. At the same time, he is scared of being identified. Therefore, self-discovery, for the Acharya, begins with the acknowledgement that he cannot really cope with the ‘world.’

It is Putta who is responsible for introducing Praneshacharya to the world beyond caste and Brahminism, the other world of material goods, violence and of sexual pleasure. In a way he completes the task that Chandri’s act of compassion had begun. As Praneshacharya is inducted into a world beyond his privation, he realises that both worlds are parts of the same integral experience, ‘one part of lust is tenderness, the other part a demoniac will.’ When he comes out of the forest to encounter for the first time the world outside the agrahara to which Putta introduces him – the fair ground with its cockfight, noise and garish colours, the ruthless world of buying and selling that Padmavati inhabits, he finds himself slipping into the all too human world of little vices – telling lies, partaking of holy rituals in a polluted condition etc.

During an encounter at the temple his old identity catches up with him as he is recognized as the Great Pundit from Durvasapura He is mortified at having been found out. So he decides to escape by fleeing. Without knowing what he is going to do, the Acharya starts back towards his old agrahara on the evening of the fourth day.

In the last part of the novel we see Praneshacharya, at a crossroads, his conflict unresolved. He no longer claims a true communion with God, 'Just as naturally as the body's desires reach out to me, not leaving me even when I think I have left them, why shouldn't God come and touch me, unwilling by me?' (82-83). He now realizes that in a ritualized existence what is often lost is man's simple relationship with God. His decision to go back to Durvasapura is an attempt at reconciling the irreconcilables. He can no longer go back to a stratified, codified existence. What is important to take from the character of Praneshacharya is that he made the decision to return on his own. In a way Naranappa's death led to Praneshacharya's return as a 'true' brahmin. Without Naranappa's death, things in the agrahara would have remained as they were. With his death, Praneshacharya is forced to introspect and question the concepts of dharma and caste. Naranappa was characterised as the 'anti-brahmin' throughout *Samskara* by the brahmins of the agrahara, but it was he who set into motion the questioning of dharma and caste for Praneshacharya allowing him to grow and return to the agrahara a better brahmin.

Three characters in different ways define Praneshacharya through opposition and polarities: Putta, Mahabala and, of course, Naranappa. Naranappa embodies all that Praneshacharya represses in his own person. He represents an un-lived part of Praneshacharya's life, giving expression to those truths that Praneshacharya does not want to accept. Acting as his alter-ego he takes him to the threshold of passion and abandonment, ridiculing those very beliefs which were most sacred to Praneshacharya. Eventually, he forces Praneshacharya into wondering about the alternative modes of quest. Salvation in the Hindu belief system is possible through two ways- by either worshipping God as a devotee or by being a heretic. In this sense Hinduism has two distinct faces: 'One indicates the rigours of social practice, of the rules of purity/pollution binary and the power hierarchies they sustain. The other face is liberation for it liberates the individual through its myths – here the great epics and legends which the Hindu considers as sacred rescue him from the severe codes.'<sup>15</sup> The way to go beyond the play of opposites, 'that's the way of liberation' (116).

Hence, Naranappa's arguments cannot be easily dismissed in the novel. The avarice, greed, lecherousness, and jealousy of the other brahmins expose their pretensions to piety. He mocks the contradictions in what Praneshacharya preaches by being completely consistent in his iconoclasm. Now Naranappa in death remains as much of a challenge to Praneshacharya, as in life.

Mahabala, the Smarta brahmin, a fellow disciple of Praneshacharya in his Kashi days, is another representation of this inverse attempt at attaining salvation. Praneshacharya had experienced a severe clash with the value system of Mahabala, who, after a rigorous study of scriptures, had suddenly become an apostate, was seeing a prostitute and was acting against all shastric injunctions. In reaction to his 'fall' Praneshacharya had taken to severe austerities. But now he finds himself treading a similar path in life.

Putta, on the other hand, symbolizes a being totally one with his world. He is not tormented by any profound dilemmas, he is accepting of his fate, is a riddle master, an expert bargainer, a procurer, a gambler and slips into all these roles with ease and enjoyment. He initiates Praneshacharya into the mysteries of the ordinary as well as the unfamiliar. In his un-self-conscious condition he remains a polar opposite of the troubled priest beset by several moral anxieties.

All the three, Putta, Mahabala and Naranappa are thus instrumental in forcing Praneshacharya to question his professed beliefs at times making him participate in the violation of the socio-religious codes.

The novel began with a dilemma of performing the 'samskara' (last rites) for Naranappa but it becomes a 'samskara' (transformation) for Praneshacharya himself. The transformation leaves him anxious and expectant at the close of the novel. The inconclusive and open ending of the novel is another reminder that even though the content of the novel is customary, its form is modernist. A dilemma grounded in a culture and ethos that is traditionally Indian, gets fictionally represented in terms that are generated by a literary movement that is Western. The novel is open-ended. The author does not offer a solution – at least not on the level of the narrative or plot.

The novel as its translator notes in his Afterword, is 'a movement, not a closure' in any traditional sense of the term. We do not have an easy answer to the manifold questions; we end, instead, with a protagonist who is on the road, 'anxious, expectant.' There is a view that the Acharya has experienced 'the pain of transcending one mode of existence to go into another.' But transcending may be misleading, since the contradictions Praneshacharya finds between stability and flux and between tradition and modernity are the kinds of contradictions one either resolves or cannot. The novel ends with Praneshacharya still on the road because these contradictions are the ones you can only negotiate, resisting closures to keep open the margins to accommodate various contingencies. What perhaps redeems Praneshacharya is that although he cannot resolve his contradictions he becomes aware of them. The

event which on the social level appears as the 'fall' of the hero is, on the psychological plane, a device which permits him to find his real 'self.'

To interpret Praneshacharya's journey in terms of the wheel of karma, one can recognise him moving from circumference (where he conceived action and ritual as distinct and hence looked for a solution in the holy Books for Naranappa's rites) to the still centre where action and ritual merge into a nebulous whole, where solutions are not longer easily available nor accessible, but had to be explored while taking personal responsibility. The union in the forest becomes symbolic of the union of the two polar forces. Fortunately for Praneshacharya, he has got wiser with experience, developing a new awareness:

He became aware, this life is a duplicity. Now he's really involved in the wheel of karma. To relieve this misery he must lose awareness again and embrace her, must wake up in that misery, for absolution, one must return to her. The wheel, the wheel of karma. This is the life of passion. Even if he had left desire, desire had not left him (78).

Praneshacharya, one ascertains, is singled out for this experience in order to achieve this heightened sense of understanding where he no longer accepts unquestioningly inviolate laws laid down ages ago. The open ending of the novel, however, leaves the final question unanswered, but then, keeping in mind the circumstances that provoke the questioning, the answer no longer remains crucial.

To read *Samskara* as a critique of orthodox Hinduism is to limit it severely for it is a novel that repudiates a decadent value system but more significantly redefines the process of a collective code giving way to individual choice. While in the beginning of the novel Praneshacharya is one of a homogenous community albeit standing taller than others, 'by the end of the novel he is a lonely man unsupported by the community or God, and has to chart out his own path.'<sup>16</sup>

### Notes

1. Rajagopala Parthasarthy, *Samskara: The Passing of the Brahmin Tradition*, Trans. Barbara Stoler Miller, 'Master Works of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective', Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994, p.189.
2. U. R. Anantha Murthy, 'Search for Identity: A View Point of a Kannada Writer,' in Sudhir Kakkar, ed., *Identity and Adulthood*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979, p.107.

3. Ibid., p.107.
4. Ibid., p.108.
5. V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1976.
6. Erik H. Erikson in Sudhir Kakkar, *Identity and Adulthood*, p.34.
7. S. Nagarajan, 'Samskara,' *Indian Writing Today*, Vol.17, July-September 1971, pp. 122-23.
8. Sudhir Kakkar, *Identity and Adulthood*, p.9.
9. Erikson in Sudhir Kakkar, *Identity and Adulthood*, p.33.
10. See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966, pp. 324-35.
11. Ramanujan, 'Afterword,' p.146.
12. U. R. Anantha Murthy, *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*, tr. A. K. Ramanujan, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 67. All subsequent page numbers are referred to this edition. The novel was first published in Kannada in 1965.
13. Suresh Raval, 'Cultural Impasse in Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*,' in Kailash C. Baral, D. Venakat Rao and Sura P. Rath, eds., *U. R. Ananatha Murthy's Samskara: A Critical Reader*, New Delhi: Pencraft, 2009, p.118.
14. Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985, p.177.
15. Ibid., p.175.
16. Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality*, p.170.

### Works Cited

- Baral, Kailash C., D. Venakat Rao and Sura P. Rath, eds., *U. R. Ananath Murthy's Samskara: A Critical Reader*. New Delhi: Pencraft, 2009.
- Dumont, Louis, *Homo Hierarchicus*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966.
- Kakkar, Sudhir, ed., *Identity and Adulthood*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Miller, Barbara Stoler, *Master Works of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective*, Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Murthy, U. R. Anantha, *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*, tr. A. K. Ramanujan, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Nagarajan, S. 'Samskara,' *Indian Writing Today*, Vol.17, July-September 1971
- Naipaul, V. S., *India: A Wounded Civilization*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1976.
- Vasavi, A. R., ed., *The Inner Mirror: Kannada Writings on Society and Culture*, New Delhi: The Book Review Literary Trust, 2009.