

Samskara : A Rite of Initiation

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U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* was the subject of considerable debate since it was first published in 1965. The Kannada critics, in particular, perceived the novel as a critique of Hinduism and an attack on Brahminic dogma until its first translation into English was published a decade later in 1976 by A. K. Ramanujan. The translation enlarged the readership of the novel and suggested a new way of reading it. The 'Afterword' by Ramanujan added an allegorical dimension to the novel which was shrouded under the criticism of the Kannada literati. It is argued that the writing of this novel helped Anantha Murthy to come to terms with his own Madhava Brahmin traditions of rural Karnataka:

The writing itself can be viewed as a 'samskara', a rite of explanation, 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 (Kakkar 107).

Murthy's Western modes of perception got into conflict with the rigidity of the Hindu society, and this is expressed in his novels, in particular, *Samskara* and *Bharathiputra*. The hierarchical pattern of society helped the Brahmins to enjoy an absolute power and they maintained their hegemony through a strict observance of rituals and customs. The Brahmins agrahara in *Samskara* is marked by rigidity, absence of spontaneity and growth, and infertility. The static

quality of life of Durvasapura village is emphasized in the beginning of the novel :

he (Praneshacharya) offered food and flowers to the gods as he did every day, put the flowers in her hair, and gave her holy water... The words were a part of a twenty-year old routine between them. A routine that began with the bath at dawn, twilight prayers, cooking, medicines for his wife. And crossing the stream again to the Maruti temple for worship. That was the unfailing daily routine (Ramanujan 1).

The word 'routine', repeated thrice in just few lines, underline the mundane life of the village. The sterility of life at the Brahmin agrahara is marked by the absence of any marriage or birth in the course of the novel. Those marriages that are briefly mentioned are all joyless and miserable. There is also a plague, followed by number of deaths, which further accentuates the crisis. In the midst of these is the figure of Praneshacharya, who studied Sanskrit in Kashi and earned the title of 'Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning' for his knowledge of all the scriptures. Through the character of Praneshacharya Murthy contests the concept of Brahminism. Praneshacharya's Brahminism is extreme and his self-imposed celibacy is a manifestation of that.

Hindus believe life is divided into four 'ashrams' which are 'dharma', 'brahmacharya', 'grahastya', 'vanaprastha' and 'sanyasa'. As per this tradition, learning is acquired in the 'brahmacharya' ashrama, and one enjoys 'artha' and 'kama' in the 'grahastya' phase. Before one attains the 'sanyasa' stage, one has to acquire both sensuality as well as material and spiritual experiences. According to the teachings of the Vedas and the Smriti, the householder is superior to all the others: "As all rivers, both great and small, find a resting place in the ocean, even so men of all orders find protection with householders" (Kakkar 9).

Therefore, a "man's neglect of as fundamental an aspect of life as sensuality (Kama) leaves him incomplete in the fulfilment of dharma" (Kakkar 33). Thus, neglecting the householder stage willfully, Praneshacharya violated the Hindu way of life. To test his

ability to renounce the 'grahasta' pleasures even though married, rather amounts to the Acharya's hubris. The plot line is divided into three parts. The first part presents before the readers the static Brahmin agrahara with its rigid rituals, who are now troubled by the death of a hedonist Naranappa and his funeral rites. The second part of the novel is set outside the agrahara in a forest where Acharya went to get solution from Lord Maruti, but instead got a re-birth after a union with the low caste Chandri, mistress of the dead Naranappa. The last part of the novel is a journey of Acharya into his own self, away from the collective norms of the agrahara, a motif common in allegories. At the beginning of the novel, Praneshacharya is very much a part of the degenerate agrahara. In the second part, he realizes he can no longer fit into the codified structure of the agrahara due to his union with the outcaste Chandri. His search for a role for himself forms the third section of the novel. Praneshacharya always thought Brahmanic code as his essential self. When that breaks, he is suddenly confronted with a question: Can he exist without Brahmanhood? What will remain of himself without it?

Instead of equating this problem only with Hinduism or with Praneshacharya, one can find a reference of it in Shakespeare's *Richard II* when Richard II faces an existential crisis:

...I have no name, no title
 No, not that name was given me at the font,
 But 'tis usurp'd: alack the heavy day!
 That I have worn so many winters out,
 And know not now what name to call myself.
 (<https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/richard-ii/act-4-scene-1/>
 accessed on 11.05.2020 at 11 pm)

Praneshacharya faces a similar dilemma. As an individual whose identity is defined by his caste, it was not easy on Praneshacharya's part to separate his 'essential self' from the societal role. But surprisingly the loss proved a blessing in disguise for it paved the way for his liberation and helped him to have a fresh look

at the world. Instead of regretting his 'act of transgression', Praneshacharya tried to rationalize his union with Chandri by referring to the chance encounters between sages and Apsaras: "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?" (Ramanujan, "Afterword", pp. 143-144).

Thus, the act of sexual union outside the space of social sanction is not viewed in negative terms in the novel. Rather it comes across as a positive one which opens the path of regeneration for Praneshacharya, fulfils him physically and emotionally, broadens and refines his human perceptions, and gives a design to the novel. The novel which began with the question of performing the last rite (*samskara*) of the heretic Naranappa, shifts later to the *samskara* (rite of passage) for Praneshacharya following his transgression of the Brahmanic code. It is an irony of fate that his 'rite of initiation' takes place through an illicit deed, totally contrary to his past austere life, and through Naranappa's mistress Chandri. Thus, the 'fall' of Praneshacharya is rather a 'fortunate' one or what is called as *felix culpa*. In orthodox Christian theology, Adam's fall from Paradise is considered 'fortunate' because it gives him maturity and the knowledge to discriminate. Similarly, Praneshacharya's 'fall' in *Samskara* is fortunate and educative as well. According to Aristotle, the protagonists of tragedies are exceptional men who 'fall' because of 'hubris', but by that they grow. Praneshacharya too grows and gains knowledge about the true meaning of 'Brahminism' and ways of attaining salvation contrary to his earlier conceived notions. For Arnold Toynbee, the "human protagonist's ordeal" is a transition from "Yin" to "Yang", i.e from innocence to full and dynamic knowledge after his rite of initiation into experience.

Sura Rath opines that *Samskara*'s message is the assertion of life despite the presence of the forces of nihilism and despair. The Acharya's self-imposed life of celibacy by willingly marrying an invalid was a strategy to gain credit in the spiritual world: "The Lord definitely means to test him on his way to salvation; that's why He has given him a brahmin birth this time and set him up in this kind of family...He proudly swells a little at his lot, thinking, 'By marrying an invalid, I get ripe and ready'" (Ramanujan 2). His wife, "Bhagirathi, [was] the altar of my [his] sacrifice" (123). His confidence in his living a life of austerity soon turned into a 'tragic flaw' or *hubris* in his character. The 'grahastya' stage which Praneshacharya tried to escape from by avoiding physical love and procreation, finally catches up with him at a forest, where he would have abandoned them forever by entering into the 'vanaprastha' stage. Through a sexual union, he experiences his own rebirth. Praneshacharya's union with Chandri is the turning point of the novel. Under a tree, a place of enlightenment, Chandri, a Shudra woman, releases him from his life of rigidity and brings him 'back to the soil'. Thus, in his supposed fall, he attains liberation. But henceforth he has to confront the anguish of the responsibility of his act.

This act on the other hand, elevates the status of Chandri from the position of a subaltern woman to that of an empowered one. The sexual union with Praneshacharya is a kind of wish fulfilment for her as she recalls what her mother said, "prostitutes should get pregnant by such holy men. Such a man was the Acharya, he had such looks, virtues; he glowed. But one had to be lucky to be blessed by such people" (46). Chandri's body is described in terms of natural elements like the earth and the river, and compared to the river Tunga, which cannot be defiled or polluted. She had an aura of self-sufficiency about her, she was "a natural in pleasure, unaccustomed to self-reproach" (68). Like the *devadasis*, Chandri is a *nityasumangali*, i.e. an 'ever-auspicious' woman. Like river Tunga,

she is in the village, but untouched by it. This is how Chandri compares her affinity with the running river:

She had enjoyed life with him [Naranappa] for ten years. How could she rest till he got a proper funeral? Her heart revolted...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 a 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 (Ramanujan 44).

The flowing river of Tunga is contrasted with the stagnant lives of the brahmins. At the beginning of the novel, Acharya is part of the homogeneous agrahara, but not corrupt or greedy like the rest of them. But halfway through the novel his sexual union with Chandri breaks the custom shell and he can no longer fit into the stratified society. In the last section of the novel, he searches for a new role for himself. So the vital question is 'What is Brahmanism' and 'Who is a Brahmin'? The Brahmins (by caste) of the agrahara were greedy, gluttonous, loved gold, were harsh towards widows and orphans and were jealous of Naranappa's hedonistic life, which were forbidden for them. While all of them backed out when the question of performing Naranappa's last rites came, they started placating Praneshacharya once Chandri offered her jewellery to cover the expenses of the funeral. In life and in death, Naranappa questioned the *samskara* of the Brahmins. He lived a carefree life in the very heart of the orthodox agrahara, broke every customs, drank liquor, kept a mistress, ate flesh being a brahmin, had Muslim friends and caught fish with them in the holy temple-tank. He left his brahmin wife and didn't even attend her funeral. In spite of all these, he was not ostracized by the community. Naranappa had proved to be a challenge to Praneshacharya's Brahminism. The latter had made his life mission to reform Naranappa. But when he ruminates why

he couldn't ex-communicate Naranappa despite all his vices, he reproaches himself when he attributes the reason to his compassion: "Che! Che! that's self-deception.' That wasn't pure pity, it covered a terrible wilfulness. His wilfulness couldn't give in to Naranappa's" (Ramanujan 47). Naranappa was in fact the alter-ego of all the devout Brahmins of Durvasapura. At one point, Praneshacharya asks himself if Naranappa was not ahead of him on the path to salvation by his 'inverted' devotion. He remembers a tale from the Rigveda:

"Once there was a Brahmin who was addicted to gambling He called upon gods and angels and wept, 'O Lord, why did you make me a gambler? Why...Indra! Yama! Varuna!

you gods! come and give me an answer.' In the places of sacrifice, the other brahmins held out their offerings and called upon the gods, Indra, Yama, Varuna and the rest, to come and receive them.

But the gods went to answer the gambler's call. The brahmins had to swallow their Brahminical pride and go where he, the scoundrel, was. It's hard to know the inner workings of dharma. An arch-sinner, an outcaste, reaches salvation and paradise by merely uttering the name Narayana with his dying breath" (Ramanujan 48).

In fact, Naranappa, "who wouldn't fold his hand before a god any time, ...As coma set in, he mumbled, "'O mother! O God Rama-chandra, Narayana!' Cried out, 'Rama Rama.' Holy names." (Ramanujan 45). At one point, Praneshacharya had doubt if Naranappa was not ahead of him on the path to salvation. The restraint and asceticism of Praneshacharya are contrasted with the abandonment and eroticism of Naranappa. Naranappa's Dionysian world is sensual, pleasure-seeking and heretic. On the other hand, Praneshacharya's is an Apollonian world which is self-disciplined, rational and ordered. There are other polarities presented in the novel: the Brahmin women are frigid, smelly, invalids, withered with dwarfish braids. The women of lower castes are sensuous, glowing

and weakness of the brahmins. Outcaste women like Chandri and Belli are romanticized by references to classical heroines like Shakuntala and Menaka. 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 serpent imageries connotes feminine eroticism in the novel: "Chandri wore her black snake-like hair in a knot" (15); Padmavati's "snake-braid coming down her shoulder, over her breast" (123) unsettles the Acharya's equilibrium; Belli "hair washed in warm water, wearing only a piece below her waist, naked above, waves of hair pouring over her back and face" (40). The tiger imagery, on the other hand, is associated with masculine lust. Naranappa confronts Chandri's body "like a raging striped tiger" (45); Praneshacharya recognizes "his body's tigerish lust" (81) when he encounters Chandri in the forest. The tiger imagery is also associated with cruel entertainment and crude joy. For instance, the acharya is horrified by the 'tigerish world of cock-fights' which is in sharp contrast to his old world of rituals and orthodoxy. Both the serpent and the tiger belong to the Dionysian world which threaten the codified life of the agrahara.

The novelist does not take sides either with the Acharya or Naranappa since both of them are distortions of certain values. When the Acharya represent restraint, control and denial of physical pleasures and also neglect of household life, Naranappa stands for abandonment and total surrender to the senses. They are poles apart, yet are two sides of the same coin. Thus, agrahara of Durvasapura was equally famous for the learned Praneshacharya and also for the scoundrel Naranappa. The real challenge was to test whose values would win in the end. They represent two ways of reaching the same destination, i.e God. The Hindu puranas do refer to two ways of attaining God – one as a devotee and the other as an enemy. Like Jaya and Vijaya, the legendary brothers, Naranappa's way is a negative one. Acharya believed that he can bring Naranappa

back to the right path. But when he wakes up in Chandri's arms in the forest he knows he has lost the battle: "I was defeated, defeated – fell flat on my face" (100). Even after Acharya attained a new sense of freedom, Naranappa continued to remain an unattainable goal: "How fearlessly, how royally Naranappa lived with Chandri in the heart of the agrahara! Even if he should join Chandri, he'll probably cover his face, who knows? What sort of existence is this!" (112). Praneshacharya finds himself in a dilemma, whether to confess or not - not confessing would mean, to continue to live in the fear of being discovered, and confessing would mean defiling Brahminism. Meenakshi Mukherjee exemplifies the existential angst of Praneshacharya to that of one transcending one mode of existence to go into another, from an epic hero to a problematic one.

Apart from Naranappa, there are two other characters who remained a state unattainable by the Acharya. They are Putta and Mahabala. The Acharya met Putta on his journey for a new self. Putta is a half-caste but he has completely accepted the fact and is quite comfortable in his own skin. He lives life wholly and involves himself in everything that comes around him. He describes his flowing nature as: "O Putta? Our Putta: if you let him go, you'll lose him; but find him, he'll never leave you..." (121). This ordinary man could achieve what a great scholar like Praneshacharya could not. Putting aside both his desires and values, he loved life and lived it too. He introduces the material world to the Acharya – the fair and chariot festival at melige, the cockfights, the lepers and to Padmavati, another low caste prostitute. Thus, it is Putta who shows the Acharya a world beyond his Brahminism – a world of material goods, sexual pleasure and violence. In a way both Chandri and Putta – two outcastes – gave a new vision to the Acharya and moved him out of his Caste and Brahminism. Here, one is reminded of Arthur Dimmesdale in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), who like the Acharya, is also a priest-protagonist. Arthur has grown pre-maturely old carrying the heavy load of erudition and reverence and gets a

new life like the Acharya in a forest with Hester. Both the protagonist's undergo a conflict with the self.

In myth and literature, as in Homer's *Odyssey*, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, 'Journeys' have often been used as a symbol of self-quest. Sometimes they are quest for home, treasure, a quest for salvation, or for experience. After the Acharya leaves Durvasapura, he undertakes a new task of adjusting himself to the world's new image of himself as a mendicant Brahmin going on his rounds for collection. He realized that it's not easy to leave one's past behind: "Even if I leave everything behind, the community clings to me, asking me to fulfil duties the brahmin is born to. It isn't easy to free oneself of this ... Shall I tell him I've sinned and lost the merits of penance? That I am no brahmin? Or just the simple truth?" (96). The Acharya left the village more out of fear than in search of his real self: A fear of being discovered, of being caught. A fear that I may not be able to keep a secret from other's eyes. I lost my original fearlessness" (96).

Acharya remembers his friend Mahabala from his Kashi days. He is another example of this inverse way of attaining salvation. Praneshacharya had severe opinion clash with the value system of Mahabala because after a rigorous study of scriptures, he suddenly gave up all and kept a prostitute in his house. In reaction to his 'fall', Acharya decided to live a life of severe austerity. But now he is following a similar path. He now feels he has been defeated by both Naranappa and Mahabala, and wonders in anguish, "Naranappa, did you go through this agony? Mahabala, did you go through it?" (132). Brahmanism in India, especially in the South, is not just a caste. It's a way of life and sometimes it even becomes one's self. Praneshacharya realizes this need to affirm "the essential and vital importance of personal identity in one's life" (Nagarajan 122). Praneshacharya's crisis is the moral and spiritual crisis of an individual who finds himself at a defining moment of his life, having trod on an amoral path. I would like to cite here the case of Oedipus, the

protagonist of *Oedipus Rex*. Despite his confidence that he can save his kingdom from plague by finding out the real murder of Laius, he finds himself set against a mighty force beyond his control. Protagonists like Oedipus or Praneshacharya believe they are the saviours of a community or race. But we find it otherwise in the course of the story. Because there are certain ‘uncontrollable’ forces which are beyond any mortal control. It is a crisis that can be extended to religion or even to a nation. The present day crisis of COVID-19 that the entire world is grappling with, and which has left even the most developed nations of the world vulnerable, is a case in point. Without no solutions on hand yet, we have arrived at a crossroads where we have to eliminate the virus by all means, or else it won't be far when the entire human race would be wiped out.

Praneshacharya also recognises the fact that there is interdependence between man and his community: “I seem to involve everyone else in what I do....Even when I slept with Chandri, unknown to everyone, I involved the life of the entire agrahara in my act” (130). Though the novel begins with the question of cremation of a hedonist Brahmin, Naranappa, it is not only about death or plague or decay. The novel, *Samskara*, like its diverse meanings, is about all the above things together with something more fundamental, invasive, and essentially opposite. It is about the continuity of life across a landscape haunted by death. In the end Praneshacharya decides to return to his agrahara, being unable to accept the material world. However, the narrative ends with a question mark: “The sky was full of stars. The moon, a sliver. A perfectly clear constellation of the Seven Sages. A sudden noise of drum beats. Here and there, the flames of a torch. The hard breathing of the bullocks climbing the hillock. The sound of the cow-bells round their necks. He will travel, for another four or five hours. Then, after that, what?” (138).

Praneshacharya leaves for Durvasapura in a dilemma: what will happen if he confesses his act to the village; and what should

the Brahmins do when confronted with Praneshacharya's confession? He comes back perhaps to look afresh at his old life. Though it is difficult to bring any sudden transformation to the deep rooted casteism in the social structure, the fact that the religious leader has been transformed, is itself a sign of hope: “Praneshacharya waited, anxious, expectant” (138).

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