

Dr. Ramlal Agarwal

U. R. Ananthamurthy's Samskara: And experience of India.

A.K. Ramanujan's translation of the Kannada novel Samskara 1965 by U. R. Anantha Murthy is a novel that deals with the rigidly codified traditional structure and beliefs of Hindu society and the consequences of their infringement. It is an archetypal story like Adam and Eve and even after more than half a century it has not lost its appeal.

The title word Samskara is a Sanskrit word very commonly used in Hindu society. Samskaras are a rigid form of rites conducted for the initiation of men from childhood onwards to pursue a particular line of thought or set of principles and the one who has undergone these rites is not supposed to stray from the path he is committed to. There are rites for children, for adults, for old men and the dead too. There are set rules of performing these rites prescribed by Hindu Sastras. Any violation of their procedure and purpose results in social boycott and ostracization. Though the whole Hindu society is bound in varying degrees by rites, their hold is vice-like on upper-caste Hindus especially Brahmins. It is in this context the novel is set.

Praneshacharya, head of an Agrahara or a commune. He has undergone all the Samskaras prescribed for a Brahmins. He wakes up early in the morning, takes cold bath, tends his sapless wife, performs sandhya and hawan, partakes simple food and reads Shastras. There is nothing beyond Shstras for him. He is invested with title of "The Crest Jewel of Vedanata" However, all is not well at the commune. A Brahmin called Naranappa flouts the rules of the community. He has relationship with an outcast woman called Chandri. He attends orgies, he drinks and eats meat. The Brahmins in the commune are horrified by his wayward behavior and are helpless to rein him in. There is no inquisition and he is not excommunicated. It so happens, that the plague breaks out at the commune and Naranappa is found dead in his room.

Naranappa had no son and hence the question of performing his last rites becomes a major issue. The Brahmins find themselves in a dilemma. Naranappa was a Brahmin and not a Brahmin. He was a Brahmin by birth and not excommunicated. He was not a Brahmin because he did not live by the code. The Brahmins were worried because if they performed his last rites, their rich patrons may boycott them from their feasts. Moreover, they cannot take food as long as the dead body is not disposed of. So, they approach Praneshacharya for guidance. Praneshacharya spends the whole night turning the pages of the rulebooks but finds no answer.

Therefore, he decides to leave the matter to the Gods. He places a flower on either side of the statue of Lord Hanuman and presumes that if the flower from the right-side falls, the Lord gives his consent to the Brahmins to cremate the body and if the flower falls from the left side, the Lord denies his consent. Whole day he waits for the signal but gets none. Late in the evening, tired and frustrated, he decides to return home. On his way he meets Chandri. Chandri goes close to him to touch his feet and Praneshacharya's hand inadvertently touches her breast and his long-suppressed desire flares up and they make love. Back home, Praneshacharya finds himself at a dead end and leaves the commune. While Brahmins

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are fretting and fuming without any solution, Chandri sells her jewelry and cremates the body. Out in the open, Praneshacharya stands in queues along with beggars for free food. He even takes up accommodation with an untouchable whore and urchins and eunuchs give him company. He realizes that his degradation is complete and wants to confess his sins to the Brahmins at the commune. He even hops into a cart heading towards the commune. The novel ends without telling us whether he really reaches the commune to confess his sins.

Obviously, the novel depicts two worlds, one is totally enclosed by obsessions with rites, rituals and routine life. A World in which there is no need to think and act beyond self. It draws sustenance from society but considers it untouchable. It is totally self-absorbed. But it is also a world which falls apart at the slightest threat to its existence. It is built on the ideas which shatter into pieces at the slightest deviation from the norm and is completely helpless in coping with temporal affairs. The other world is a world of dire poverty, disease and promiscuity. But not entirely without its saving grace. Chandri is a fallen woman and Shripati a rake. But Chandri unloads her jewellery to cremate her dead lover and Shripati rises to cremate the body when he had gone on a drunken debauch. It is a world that can absorb shocks, threats and pollution.

Samskara was received as an affront to brahminical order, a deliberate delineation of decadence and debauchery, an attempt to malign brahmins, and project them as morons. The novel is about all that has been said and felt by its critics. But, at another level, it is also a novel about an idealist who wants to live by the norm, falls and struggles to regain his lost position. The overriding message of the novelist is that obsessive traditionalism, fanaticism and exclusivism are the dead end for any society.