

Indian Orthodoxy Reflected in Samskara

Rupal S. Patel

Associate Professor & HoD (English),
Shri MP & BA Patel (Detrojwala)
Umiya Arts & Commerce College for
Girls, Sola, Ahmedabad – 380060,
Gujarat, India.
Email: rupalben.patel@yahoo.com

Abstract

Samskara, by Anant Murthy, exposes hypocrisy, castism, orthodoxy and superstitions of Indian villages. The people of Durvashapura, a typical Indian village, suffer from superiority complex that they believe that they are greater and more religious than other caste people. The conflict between tradition and modernity, conventional and unconventional, conservation and modernism and also between the various castes are at the core of the novel through the characters of Praneshacharya, Chandri, Naranappa, Lakshmidevamma etc. The whole novel moves round a question – ONCE A BRAHMIN, ALWAYS A BRAHMIN?

This novel proves that Samskara is not the estate of the high caste Brahmins only but the act of Samskara would become the estate of low caste people also. In short, the aim of the novelist is to expose the follies and foibles of Indian Brahmin Society in a very satirical way.

Key Words

Samskara, Orthodoxy, Brahmin.

Samskara , by Anant Murthy, lashes out at various follies and foibles of Indian society. Durvasapura is a typical Indian village where orthodoxy, hypocrisy, casteism and superstitions are rampant. The Brahmins of Indian villages suffer from superiority complex. They believe that they are greater and more religious than the other caste people of India. In Durvasapura, there is a kind of confrontation between the community, between tradition and modernity, between conventional and unconventional, between conservation and modernism and also between the various castes. And these are the realities of Indian social life.

The protagonist of the novel, Praneshacharya, is a very traditional Brahmin who is an Acharya of the Brahmin community of Agrahara who reads Vedas, Puranas and has a lot of knowledge about Indian myths and legends. He studied in Kashi and became a pundit, and now all the power is in his hands. Whatever he speaks, it becomes a part of gospel for the other people of Durvasapura. As people say, "Acharya, you are our greatest scholar, your word is Vedic gospel to us" (Murthy,5). The other Brahmins have no faith in themselves, but they believe that their guru is like a godly figure for them. In this way, they have a blind faith in him. As described here:

Wait till Praneshacharya gives you a decision. You may do the wrong thing. The guru will excommunicate you (Murthy , 4).

The whole book is a great satire on Brahminism and its orthodox rules and customs. In the beginning of the novel, there is a satire on regular bath as Brahmins greatly believe in bath. At every occasion bath is an inevitable element for them. Their daily routine begins with bath. In the evening they take another bath. That is the unfailing daily routine which is highly ironical. It is just like mechanical emotions without change. The word "routine" as a symbol is used as a negative approach by the author. It suggests that the Brahmin's life is bath oriented. But Naranappa, the only rebel of such rituals, does everything against this daily routine. He is very different from other Brahmins. He is a superior Brahmin by virtue of his learning and action. In this way, his character becomes very complex.

The hypocrisy of the characters is exposed through the whole system of funeral of Naranappa which shows the rigidity of Brahmins. On the occasion of the death of Naranappa , Garudacharya, a Brahmin from their community, runs from one house to another and informs about the death of Naranappa. The news of the death of Naranappa spreads like a wild fire along the house of Agrahara. Doors and windows are shut with children inside. And they become happy that no Brahmin has yet eaten. According to them, alive Naranappa was an enemy but dead, a provider of meals. They express:

We aghara people had a bad fight with Naranappa, we didn't exchange even water and rice (Murthy , 18).

After the death of Naranappa, all the Brahmins gather near the house of Praneshacharya. As per the Acharya's order, Naranappa's death rite – *samskara* has to be performed. He has no children; therefore someone else has to do it. Here is a satire that a person who died without son is unable to get proper death – rite. Then Praneshacharya by referring the ancient holy books declares that any relative of Naranappa can perform death rite – *Samskara* on him. The dead Naranappa was a relative of Garudacharya and Lakshmannacharya but at present, they are unwilling to perform his death – rite because of the quarrel between two families. Everybody tries to escape from the responsibility of Naranappa's cremation – Samskara, a rite after death. Praneshacharya tries to persuade them that according to the holy books, except the Brahmins nobody has right to touch Naranappa's dead body. Isn't it satirical that among the Brahmins, nobody wishes to take responsibility of Naranappa's death rite and the people of other caste are not able to do cremation? Of course, at last, Chandri and her Muslim friends perform the proper funeral.

The attitude of the Brahmins towards the low caste people is highly satirical. Here, Chandri stands for the low caste community and Brahmins believe that they will be polluted if they even talk with Chandri and so they have to take bath. They could not eat the meal prepared by the low caste people like Chandri. Only Naranappa ate all that Chandri cooked. It shows typical brahmin's attitude to the low caste people. As described here:

Chhi, chhi, chhi, don't be too rash Acharya. O' no, a Brahmin isn't lost because he talks to a low prostitute (Murthy, 5).

In *Samskara*, Anant Murthy has used human body as a symbol to represent satire. Plague which has visited the village is in fact a disease among the Brahmin community. The plague is in fact, in the minds of the orthodox Brahmin people.

Even among the Brahmins, there are various categories like higher class Brahmins and lower class Brahmins. According to the Brahmins of Durvasapura, they are higher than the Brahmins of Parijatpura as their orthodoxy is not as strict as the Brahmins of Durvasapura. They believe that the Brahmins of Parijatpura are hybrid Brahmins. All the groups have their own Acharyas and there are arguments among all these Acharyas and among all these Acharyas, Praneshacharya becomes super pundit because he won honours at every seat of learning in the south and so he is called as "Crest Jewel of Vedic Learning". As the author describes:

Our Acharya has won all sorts of arguments with all the super pundits, yours and ours, won honours at every seat of learning in the south, fifteen lace shawls and silver platters (Murthy, 6).

It is really satirical that though he is a super pundit, he is not able to solve the problem of the funeral of Naranappa. Through the Acharyaship of Praneshacharya, Anant Murthy exposes the hypocrisy of Acharya who is not even able to solve the problem of his community - Naranappa's death rite.

Chandri, a low caste woman worships Acharya as a God because she believes that only Acharya Praneshcharya is able to find out proper solution of her Naranappa's death rite. She, therefore, falls at his feet and the behaviour of Praneshacharya with Chandri is like an ordinary human being's behaviour. As the author describes:

At that time Chandri's breast touched his knee. In the vehemence of her stumbling, the buttons of the blouse caught and tore open. She leaned her head on his thigh and embraced his legs. ... His bending hand felt her hot breath, her warm tears; his hair rose in a thrill of tenderness and he caressed her loosened hair. ... As his hand played on her hair, Chandri's intensity doubled. She held his hands tightly and stood up and she pressed them to her breasts now beating away like a pair of doves.

Touching full breasts he had never touched, Praneshacharya felt faint. As in a dream, he pressed them. As the strength in his legs was ebbing, Chandri sat the Acharya down, holding him close. The Acharya's hunger, so far unconscious, suddenly raged, and he cried out like a child in distress, "Amma!" Chandri leaned him against her breasts, took the plantains out of her lap, peeled them and fed them to him. Then she took off her sari, spread it on the ground, and lay on it hugging Praneshacharya close to her, weeping, flowing in helpless tears. (Murthy, 63 - 64).

A man like a pillar of whole Brahmin community behaves in such a way is really not only satirical but also shocking. Through this event, Anant Murthy wants to expose the so called leading person's hypocrisy. In the lives of these types of persons, there is a great difference between what they actually are and how they represent themselves before the society. Not only Brahmin men but also Brahmin women are with full of orthodox rituals. Though the Brahmin wives are ideal for the other caste women, they curse and abuse

Chandri as “an evil witch”. Their greediness and jealousy are exposed when Chandri presents a heap of gold for the cremation of Naranappa.

The description of meal is also ironical. The Brahmins are made for meals. According to Anant Murthy meal is everything for them. They can do anything for meal. The description of Dasacharya and his eagerness for meal is quite amusing which proves that the life of Brahmins are meal oriented, as Anant Murthy points out:

Dasacharya lived entirely on the meals that Brahmins get at death rites and anniversaries. He would walk ten miles for such a meal any day (Murthy, 49).

The novelist compares the hunger of Brahmins with the hot street of Agrahara and describes that the Agrahara Street was so hot that one could popcorn on it. Actually the street of Agrahara is not hot but the stomach of Brahmins is very “Hot”. Here the stomach is personified with the hot streets. The Brahmins become weak with hunger which produces a lot of humour. Through humour, the author exposes the hunger of Brahmins for meal.

The Brahmins thought that they perform all these activities for getting Moksha, for the betterment of the people. They blindly believe that if one wants to get Moksha, one has to give a cow to a Brahmin, spend money for meals and make pilgrimage. But, the question arises - can anyone get Moksha by doing all these earthly rituals?

All the Brahmins do these earthly activities as their holy ancient books say. Whenever they have any problem, they refer the holy books and later on take decisions. They don't use their own knowledge. They do not think independently. They greatly believe in old customs. As described here:

According to ancient custom, until the body is properly removed, there can be no worship, no bathing, no food, nothing (Murthy,50).

Isn't it humourous and satirical that the Brahmins who become a pundit in ancient holy rituals, can not make decisions independently but they only have to follow ancient holy books? It proves that there is an ambiguity between Dharma and Karma. On the one hand there is dead body of Naranappa and on the other hand, a heap of gold offered by Chandri for the funeral of Naranappa's dead body. It is quite satirical that at the mention of Dharma, the so called Brahmins do not deal with the dead body of Naranappa. Isn't it a great sin? In the beginning, all the Brahmins are trying to escape from the death rite of

Naranappa. But Chandri gives her gold ornaments which tempt them. Garudacharya and Lakshmanacharya are tempted by the gold. These gold ornaments have confused them. At last, Praneshachary keeps it with him.

To join army was also a great sin in those days. The Brahmin people of that time believe that if any Brahmin joins the army, he is a sinner. Garudacharya's son joins the army and so other Brahmins believe that he has left samskara and committed sin. As quoted here:

He is in the army, he'll have no baths, no prayers and they'll force him to eat meat now (Murthy, 28).

Satire emerges when the Brahmins behave like great and superior persons but the situation of their houses is worst. In their houses, there are cockroaches in the butter milk shelves and fat rats in the store rooms. This situation is found in almost all the Brahmin's houses. A Brahmin who is the greatest religious person of society but the situation of his house is so dirty that it is really difficult to call him a real Brahmin.

The Brahmins of Agrahara compare Naranappa with a snake which is also satirical. According to the Brahmins, the snake is twice born, so they have to perform rites for it and Brahmins should not eat till the end of the rites. Similarly, Naranappa is a Brahmin and so they have to perform the rites. But they believe that by eating flesh and drinking wine, Naranappa has lost his Brahmin hood. He has also slept with a low caste woman – Chandri.

Being Brahmins, they believe that they are able to take on the sins of other people. They get this power from the God because they are born as Brahmins. Because of their Brahmin hood, they have pride. Here the author satirizes by pointing: 'After all we are born as Brahmins only to take on others' sin' (Murthy, 34). In fact, they are not able to remove their own sin, how can they take on the other's sin. They are born Brahmins but how can they take on others' sins? This thought exposed orthodoxy among the Brahmins.

There is another important character in the Brahmin colony named Shripati who flirts with Belli which is a great attack on Brahmin hood. It is the pivotal example of hypocrisy. On the one hand, they believe in an orthodox brahminhood and on the other hand, they, particularly Shripati, flirt with an orphan girl Belli. Here is the great difference between what they believe and how they behave. As the author narrates:

He turned his flashlight on and off and embarrassed her. Shripati wrapped on his dhoti again, put on his shirt, took out a pocket comb and combed his cropped hair and ran in hurry (Murthy, 41).

Here the word 'again' is highly satirical. It means Shripati comes to Belli again and again. Here Anant Murthy attacks Brahmin wives indirectly. According to this view, all the Brahmin wives are sexless, while the women of other castes are seen as glowing sex objects and temptations to the Brahmins. Low caste and out caste women like Chandri and Belli are romanticized by references to classical heroines like Shakuntala, Menka and Matsyagandha – the tempters of sages.

The marriage system as described here is also satirical because in those days the marriage was possible at a very young age. But nowadays there is a great change in the system of marriage. Lakshmidavamma who married at eight, widowed at ten and her father-in-law and mother-in-law had died when she was fifteen. The Agrahara has sneered at her as the ill-starred girl. At a very young age, she loses all her happiness of life.

Lakshmidavamma is something different from all the other rigid Brahmins. When the Brahmins do not deal with the dead body of Naranappa properly, she attacks the Brahminhood and cries:

Where has your Brahminhood gone, you rascals! Brahminism is in ruins, why don't you shave your heads and become Muslims (Murthy, 43).

The knowledgeable Brahmins can not understand the above thing which can be easily understood by a widow, without knowledge. Indian superstition is also reflected through the appearance of the ghost of Naranappa and it is believed if Naranappa's dead body doesn't get the proper rituals, he can become a tormenting ghost.

The author's targets are the strait – laced village Brahmins who attend to the samskara (rituals) but have not earned by any means of their "refinement of spirit" (samskara). They are greedy, gluttonous, and mean spirited. They love gold, betray orphans and widows and are also jealous of Naranappa's every forbidden pleasure.

The meeting of Putta with Praneshacharya is full of humour as well as satirical, particularly when Putta leads Praneshacharya to a woman who stays as a tenant. She is a courageous woman, as she lives alone. Putta tells the Acharya that he has to wash his hands clean to touch her. She is very respectful to orthodox Brahmins like him. She does not allow low caste men near her. She also does not allow any ordinary Brahmin for a few coins. Even the ancient sages would fall for her. She is like that. It is also satirical that a man like Praneshacharya becomes lustful and comes to the woman. Through this incident, Anant Murthy shows the fall of Praneshacharya.

The great and very important question which emerges during the whole novel is:

Once a Brahmin, always a Brahmin?

Ironically in the very act of seeking the answer in the holy books and later in seeking a sign from Maruti, the chaste Monkey God, the Acharya does abandon everything and becomes one with his opposite; contrary to all his preparations, he sleeps with Chandri, Naranappa's low caste mistress. Despite all the virtues of Acharya, he does not have the virtue of living out fully his present stage. After that incident, Praneshacharya feels that his fall brings him down equivalent to Naranappa. By what authority now can he judge Naranappa or advise his Brahmin followers? His sudden sexual experience with the forbidden Chandri becomes an orthodox "rite of initiation" so the question "Who is a Brahmin, how is he made?" It is important to understand here. At last he begins to transform himself.

Thus, the movement of the whole book is torn between Dharma and Karma. Satire emerges between what the Brahmins believe – Dharma and how they behave – Karma. The difference between belief and behaviour produces not only humour but also satire which shows their hypocrisy and orthodoxy.

The end of the novel is also ambiguous. It has multiple meanings and provides a lot of curiosity to the readers. Perhaps the writer deliberately creates the open end. But we can not get satisfaction with the present end. The end depends on the readers. The novel in a way ends but does not conclude.

In the whole novel, Naranappa is a challenge to the orthodox Brahmin society and Brahminhood. He is also a challenge to Brahmins who are hypocrite in action and life. Samskara is not the estate of the high caste Brahmins only but the act of Samskara would become the estate of Chandri and her Muslim friends who are non – Brahmins and perform Naranappa's Samskara after his death.

In short, the whole novel exposes hypocrisy and orthodoxy of the higher caste people – Brahmins - of India which is the main theme of this novel. The aim of the novelist is to expose the follies and foibles of Indian Brahmin society in a very humorous way and no doubt, Anant Murthy has excellently done it.

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