
Caste and Rituals in “Samskara”

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Article Received: 05/10/2025**Article Accepted:** 06/11/2025**Published Online:** 07/11/2025DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.11.48

Abstract:

The primary focus of this paper is the controversy surrounding the caste system in Indian society. "Samskara: A Rite for Dead Man" was written by Indian contemporary author U.R. Ananthamurthy. Indian culture is strongly rooted in the caste system followed by rituals. Given their caste system and Hindu faith, this research paper explores the proper mindset of the Brahmins of agrahara in the book. Set in a fictional society, the story explores the complex social relationships, traditions, and prejudices around caste. The book is divided into three parts. The novel examines caste concerns in society and is set in two communities with caste systems.

Key Words:Brahmins, caste, culture, tradition, agrahara, prejudices**Introduction:**

U.R. Ananthamurthy "Samskara" explores the caste system and traditions of a rural Karnataka Brahmin community in great detail. The book examines the intricate social structure of the hamlet, where daily interactions are governed by caste-based hierarchies and religious rituals. When determining whether to carry out funeral rites for Naranappa, a community member who defied Brahminical norms by leading an unconventional lifestyle, the main character, Praneshacharya, must weigh moral and traditional considerations. U.R. Ananthamurthy's "Samskara" focusses on caste and rituals, which have a significant impact on the lives and moral dilemmas of the residents of a Karnataka Brahminical village.

Caste defines the social structure, shapes people's identities and interactions, and establishes expectations for society. Characters like the revered Brahmin scholar Praneshacharya, who inherits power and status, represents the highest level of this hierarchy, while lower caste women like Chandri are marginalised and persecuted. The plot heavily relies on religious and social rituals to enforce caste differences and identify cultural borders. Village life is shaped by rituals, which also symbolise adherence to tradition. They range from intricate burial rites to regular prayers and sacrifices.

However, ritual practices also become a battleground for existential dilemmas and ethical debates, particularly following Naranappa's death. In the wake of Naranappa passing, Praneshacharya is compelled to reassess his own beliefs and societal norms against the stark divisions between caste purity and pollution. The dispute regarding whether to perform Naranappa last rites underscores the contradictions and hypocrisy inherent in the caste system, along with the challenges of claiming personal freedom within a rigidly defined social hierarchy. The novel "Samskara" delves into the intricate social structures and cultural traditions that shape the lives of Brahmin society through the lens of caste and rituals. The novel explores the extent to which entrenched social customs and religious practices influence personal identities, interpersonal relationships, and the dynamics within communities, focusing on caste and rituals. A key aspect of this theme is the rigid caste system, which dictates an individual's social status and role in the community. The Brahmins, at the top of the caste hierarchy, enjoy certain social advantages and are expected to maintain the purity and sanctity of their caste by diligently adhering to traditions and rituals. Rituals such as daily prayers, sacred offerings, and purification processes help sustain social order and reinforce caste divisions. These rituals not only serve as religious practices but also function as markers of social identity and status, revealing who is included and excluded from the community. Furthermore, the narrative showcases the subordinate position of women in the Brahmin community by exploring how gender and caste norms and traditions intersect. The responsibilities of women are largely confined to domestic duties and childbearing, as they are expected to adhere to strict standards of behaviour and purity. Through her quest for independence and self-identity within the confines of a rigid patriarchal society, Chandri embodies the challenges faced by women trapped by patriarchal and caste-based customs. The characters in the novel wrestle with moral dilemmas and existential issues against a backdrop of caste and rituals. Praneshacharya, the protagonist, faces the challenge of reconciling his ethical obligations as a compassionate individual with his religious duties as a Brahmin.

His encounter with Chandri, the marginalized woman, and the ethical dilemma that emerged from it - specifically, whether or not to perform Naranappa's burial rituals—highlights the hypocrisy and contradictions inherent in caste-based discrimination. Praneshacharya's internal conflict mirrors the broader struggle within caste-based societies between obligation and longing, modernity and tradition. "Samskara" offers a complex critique of Brahminical society and its oppressive systems through its exploration of caste and rituals. It prompts readers to reflect on the moral dilemmas faced by individuals trapped in the system, as well as the enduring impact of caste-based discrimination. The narrative consists of three distinct segments. The death of a hedonist named Naranappa and his funeral rites disrupt the rigid Brahmin agrahara procedures that are introduced to the readers in the first section. The second part of the book takes place in a forest outside of an agrahara, where Acharya went to ask Lord Maruti for help. But there he indulged with Chandri, a lower caste lady who had been the mistress of the late Naranappa, he returned and was reborn. The novel's final portion examines Acharya's journey into his own self and away from the agrahara's communal regulations, a common theme in allegories.

The ramifications of Naranappa's death extend beyond the realm of funeral traditions and serve as a depressing reminder of the enduring power dynamics that are deeply embedded in caste-based society. Enforcing strict caste laws deprives individuals of their agency and perpetuates social inequality based on birth, both of which fuel structural injustice. The death of Naranappa also prompts the community to re-examine the linkages between caste and gender.

Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable" portrays caste prejudice in a dramatic way via the perspective of Bakha, an untouchable child who is continuously shunned and degraded by a society that considers him to be inferior and unclean. The brutality of caste-based prejudice and how it dehumanises individuals like Bakha are highlighted in the novel. Furthermore, by exploring the forbidden love between lower-caste twins and the repercussions of their connection in a community that is severely divided by caste stereotypes, Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" explores the complexities of caste relations in Kerala, India. Naranappa's life and death raise questions about the core principles of the Brahmin society. Even though Naranappa is from a Brahmin family, he disobeys the rigid caste restrictions by partaking in activities that are considered sacrificial, such as eating meat, consuming alcohol, and socialising with members of lower castes.

He was already a social outcast because of his drinking, eating, and sleeping with Chandri, a woman from a lower caste. He can still receive some ceremonial honours following his death as a Brahmin, nevertheless. In the agrahara, Brahmins must choose between performing his last rites and running the risk of ritual impurity or refusing and breaking their holy duties. This is a moral and religious dilemma.

The tension between the strict following of religious rituals and the need for compassion and pragmatism is personified by Praneshacharya, the learnt and devout leader of the agrahara. His initial response, which highlights his reliance on traditional authority, is to seek guidance from religious texts. However, the books don't offer a conclusive response, demonstrating how religious orthodoxy is unable to deal with complex problems in daily life. Praneshacharya's final encounter with Chandri, a symbol of dedication and purity, sets off an internal transformation in him. This experience forces him to confront his own repressed desires as well as the flaws in a rigid, ritualistic approach to spirituality.

His spiritual crises suggest that true spirituality might be found outside of ceremonial cleanliness and caste-based discrimination. Chandri's role is crucial when examining how gender and caste standards overlap. Her lower caste background raises questions about her offerings, despite her devotion to Naranappa and her willingness to spend her income to pay for his funeral. This highlights the ways in which caste and patriarchy govern religious rituals. Chandri's presence and actions challenge the Brahmins' notions of purity and their authority over social and religious norms. The inherent hypocrisy of religious dogma is criticised in the book. By refusing to perform Naranappa's last rituals, the Brahmins reveal their moral failings and put their dread of defilement ahead of their religious duty.

Their justifications and reasoning show a civilisation more concerned with maintaining ceremonial purity and social order than it is with compassion or moral behaviour. The book demonstrates how social control mechanisms, such as burial ceremonies and adherence to regulations, are used to mould interpersonal relationships and group behaviour. These rituals protect traditional values and uphold the hierarchical caste system by defining duties and responsibilities based on an individual's caste identification.

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