
**Praneshacharya, an embodiment of transformation from Tradition to
Modernity in U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara***

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Abstract: The caste system is a serious problem from ancient Indian society to present India. This evil system has dimmed the bright image of India in the modern world. It mostly affects the people from lower castes and women. In the name of religion, culture, and tradition, the upper caste people continue to dominate and exploit the underprivileged sections of society. Nothing is permanent. Tradition and culture are not fixed ideas. They change with time and society. As new ideas, methods, and the advancement of technologies come into the world, people often find it hard to accept them—especially when these changes challenge traditional old customs. Conflict comes when some people try to hold on to the old traditions while the world around them keeps changing. Some of these changes may bring improvement, but some people still try to keep the evil system unchanged due to their deep connection to the past. Again, there are some people who are in constant conflict between tradition and modernity.

In the novel *Samskara*, written by Udupi Rajagopalacharya Ananthamurthy, we see this conflict clearly in the character of Praneshacharya, a respected Brahmin head of a village. His character raises the question of the meaning of identity and culture after having faced a personal crisis. His journey shows how traditional beliefs can lose their grip in the modern world. The central character Praneshacharya also shows the confusion and the continuous struggle people have to go through when they try to balance personal desires and social expectations. One of the important points of the novel is that here the novelist has tried to highlight the conflict between tradition and modernity through Praneshacharya.

Overall, *Samskara* reveals the deep cracks in the social structure caused by blind faith in outdated traditions. The novelist has tried to make us think about whether these old systems are really useful today or just ways to keep inequality alive. The story encourages us to reflect on our values and understand the difference between living with cultural roots and being trapped by them. The novelist has tried to focus on the right way, which Praneshacharya chooses, to build a strong and division-less nation.

Keywords: rituals, transformation, Brahminism, customs

Introduction: The novel *Samskara* was originally written in the Kannada language by U.R. Ananthamurthy and later translated into English by A.K. Ramanujan. The story takes place in a small village called Durvasapura, located in the Western Ghats of Karnataka. The title *Samskara* is a Sanskrit word that has many meanings, and interestingly, the novel explores almost all those meanings. According to translator A.K. Ramanujan, the word refers to an important concept in Hinduism. His English version of the novel is subtitled *A Rite for a Dead Man*, which points directly to one of the main issues of the story.

The novel *Samskara* has been widely appreciated and accepted by English-speaking readers. This is because the story deals with traditional Indian society but in a bold and meaningful way. The subject matter is integrated into Indian culture, yet it points out the real problems that are still prevalent in Indian society. That is why people from outside India also find it interesting. The success of this novel also helped the novelist, U.R. Ananthamurthy, gain recognition in Indo-Anglian Fiction (Indian literature written in or translated into English). His work stood out because it combined Indian themes with a writing style that English readers could easily understand.

The title of the novel is a little different and special. It also means something important when we think about Indian society. The novel was written in the 1960s, which was not long after India became independent. During that time, many villages in South India were in a very deplorable condition. The higher caste people implemented old religious customs very strictly and did not want to change their ways. In this novel, Ananthamurthy has tried to show the true picture of that time. He has especially shown how Brahmins used to live and what kind of religious rules they followed.

The subtitle of the novel is “A Rite for a Dead Man,” which means “Samskara” or the last religious ceremony done after a person dies, especially the cremation. In Hindu tradition, it is believed that when a person dies, he or she must be given a proper and holy cremation. This is an important ritual to bring peace to the dead soul. The subtitle “A Rite for a Dead Man” clearly shows what the story is mainly about. The whole novel is connected to this idea. The main focus of the story is the death of a man named Naranappa and the problem that was created after his death, especially about who will do his cremation and how. This issue becomes a very serious matter and of importance. For the arrangement of a proper cremation, the protagonist Praneshacharya’s character is also revealed.

Naranappa was born a Brahmin, but he did not follow the rules and customs of Brahminism. In fact, he did the opposite of what Brahmins were supposed to do. That is why he is called an “anti-Brahmin.” He did not believe in the strict lifestyle of Brahmins. He brought a prostitute from a lower caste into the Brahmin area called the agrahara (a place where only Brahmins live) and started living with her in his house. He also invited his

Muslim friends into the agrahara. He ate meat and drank alcohol in front of the Brahmins, which was seen as an insult to their religion and culture. His lifestyle was not supportable in Brahmin society. When he was alive, he was a problematic character to the other Brahmins because, being a Brahmin, he followed the lifestyle of an anti-Brahmin.

When Naranappa died, his cremation became a big problem. The Brahmins in the village did not want to perform his last rites because they felt that he had broken all Brahmin rules. But they also wanted the cremation to be done quickly. They believed if a Brahmin's dead body is not cremated, no one in the agrahara is allowed to eat or drink. So, they were stuck in a great problem. They did not want to do the ritual. They could not even lead a normal life until it was done.

Naranappa had died of the plague, a very dangerous disease that was spreading at that time. U.R. Ananthamurthy used the plague not just as a real illness but also as a symbol. For him, the plague represented dirt, decay, and the 'unhealthy' state of Brahmin society, which had become full of rigid rules and lifeless traditions. Due to their inclination towards outdated customs, they almost forgot humanity. They did not care that the dead body of any human being must be cremated, whether he or she followed the rituals and customs of a particular religion or not. The novelist used the disease as a metaphor to show how the Brahminical system became impure and rigid in the past.

The Brahmins of Durvasapura could not decide what to do. Having heard the news of the death of Naranappa, they became perplexed. They discussed the issue with one another, but the result was futile. They also discussed the matter with other Brahmins of a nearby village. Having not found any solution, they decided to hand over the matter to Praneshacharya, who was the leader of the Brahmins of their village. He was well-known for his knowledge and spiritual guidance. The story then focuses on how Praneshacharya struggles with this decision.

Praneshacharya is a deeply religious and well-educated Brahmin who studied the Vedas in Varanasi, one of the holiest places in India. His biggest goal in life is to get salvation (moksha), which means freedom from the cycle of birth and death. To stay fully focused on this goal, he chooses to marry an invalid woman named Bhagirathi, who is physically unwell and cannot have a physical relationship with him. This way, he can stay on his spiritual path.

But this also shows a kind of double standard or hypocrisy in his character. This novel shows how Praneshacharya, being a leader and a respected upper-caste man, uses his wife Bhagirathi as just a way to achieve his goal of salvation. He does not marry her out of love or care. She is treated like a tool—not as a person with feelings. There was no real emotion or respect in that relationship. He thought that staying away from physical pleasure would make him more spiritual. This reflects how some upper-caste men saw women and lower-caste people as less important and used them to build their own image of being pure and holy. Even after the death of Bhagirathi, he follows the practices meticulously.

Praneshacharya tries to reform Naranappa when he was alive, but all efforts are in vain. He even tries to convince the people of his community after Naranappa's death to support him in performing his last rites, but no one shows any kind of sympathy. When Chandri comes to inform him about Naranappa's death, Praneshacharya is very concerned about staying "pure" because Chandri belongs to a low caste. But later, he gives in to his desires, which shows that all his talk about purity, control, and religion was not completely honest. His actions show the hypocrisy in his character, especially in how he treats women and people from lower castes.

On the other hand, it may also be noted that Praneshacharya may be looked upon as a transformed character. Apparently, he was seen as a fully religious-minded man and completely devoted to religion. It seemed to us that he tried to stay within the periphery of religious rules and rituals. He apparently gave no importance to carnal desire, as is proved in his marriage to an invalid woman. He even did not wish the low-caste concubine of Naranappa, named Chandri, to come near him. He wanted to devote himself to serving the gods and goddesses. It is clear that he wanted to lead a life like that of a saint.

The above-mentioned qualities were there in his conscious mind. But in his subconscious mind, the qualities, which were hidden, were contrary. What he tried to avoid in his youth was his physical desire. But he could not escape from it. He became prey easily when he made a physical relationship with Chandri. After that, he looked like a changed personality. He gave permission to Chandri to cremate the dead body of Naranappa, and after having wandered here and there, he decided to do that himself without thinking of the help of others. Previously, he was very strict about religious rules and rituals. But now he has understood the value of humanity. He, at present, looks upon a man of any religion or caste as a human being. Previously, the more he was fastened to religious rules and rituals, the more he is now flexible. Now he does not hate the carnal desire, which was hidden in his mind. He takes this as a normal desire. It is through Praneshacharya that the novelist has tried to present an enlightened man in new India. The novelist dreamt of an India that will be free from any orthodox ritual or custom. Everyone will give value to humanity.

At the beginning of the novel, Praneshacharya was fixed to the Brahmin culture and rituals. He never does anything that was beyond the rigid rules or rituals of the Brahmin society. But towards the end of the novel, we see that he is a reformed or changed personality. He, having forgotten all about his own culture and rituals of Brahminism, makes a physical relationship with the low-caste woman Chandri. Initially, he was the embodiment of *Samskara*, but later he becomes the symbol of the decadence of Brahminism. In the Brahminical culture, it was never accepted that a Brahmin would intentionally touch a low-caste woman or make a physical relationship with her. Praneshacharya breaks the barrier. In the light of modernism, the relationship between a man and a woman is normal. Caste cannot be a hindrance. He realizes this truth towards the end of the novel. In the conflict between tradition and modernity that was going on in his mind, modernity wins. He now is ready to

cremate the dead body of Naranappa, who, when he was living, tried to get him on his own track and follow him. Though he was a Brahmin, he was not a blind follower of the customs and rituals of Brahminism. He tried to enjoy his life as much as he could, rather than being trapped in conventionalism. Indirectly, it is Naranappa who reformed Praneshacharya. The interesting matter is that when he was alive, he was unsuccessful in doing so. But his own death reforms the character of Praneshacharya completely. For this reason, it is often said that Naranappa is more alive after his death.

In conclusion, we can say that Praneshacharya has been introduced in this novel as an erudite Brahmin who completely followed orthodox Hindu customs and rituals. He believed in discipline, sexual abstention, rituals, and the caste system. In the village, he is respected as a spiritual leader who guides other Brahmins in matters of purity, religion, and tradition. But this strong image begins to diminish when Naranappa, an outcast Brahmin who had rejected tradition and Hindu rituals, dies. No one in the village wants to perform his funeral rites. All eyes then turn to Praneshacharya for a decision. But he hesitates to do so. He cannot find any solution. This marks the beginning of his internal conflict. Despite all his knowledge and status, he gets no real answer. Tradition cannot help him in this crucial situation. He tries to find a solution from religious texts, but here also he fails. The real turning point appears when he meets a low-caste woman and makes a physical relationship with her. His self-image is immediately shattered as a pure, ideal Brahmin for this act. Despite going back to the village, he wanders alone here and there. He begins to think deeply about his life, beliefs, and what it all means. It becomes as clear as daylight to him that his blind following of tradition kept him far away from real life, real feelings, and real questions. He felt that he had lived for the sake of duty, not for himself. This journey outside the village becomes his path to modern thinking. He begins to think for himself instead of relying only on holy scriptures or books. He stops judging others through the lens of caste and purity. He understands that life is not limited within the circumference of just black-and-white rules. By the end of the novel, we can see that Praneshacharya is a transformed individual. He no longer sees himself as a pure Brahmin. He welcomes the new ways of thinking. Though he does not yet have all the answers, he knows now that change must begin with questioning. His shift from tradition to modernity is evident in his decision to cremate Naranappa's dead body properly without caring what other Brahmins may think of him. He may now be looked upon as a modern man who is free from the restrictions of rules and rituals. Probably, the intention of the novelist was to transform traditional India into modern India, and he has tried to do so through the character of Praneshacharya.

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