

Caste Prejudices in U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* – A Rite for a Dead Man

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Abstract

The current paper refers to the conflict i.e. Brahmin v/s low caste which has been prevalent since the time immemorial in Indian society. The Indian society has been largely structured in a very complex way, based on religious ideologies. The roots of such a system have been deeply rooted in the Indian psyche. U.R. Ananthamurthy's chief concern in *Samskara* is to give a direct reference to religion which sounds like sensitive and controversial topic. Ananthamurthy brings before his readers an individual in this novel, with boundaries of caste-living according to tough rules of community and finely a sickly sweet life, restricted by customs and rules of society, the loading of tradition now overwhelming a caste which is unable to adapt.

Keywords: U.R. Ananthamurthy, Religion, casteism, Discrimination.

Introduction

The beginning of Indo-Anglican literature has a long past. The history of literature takes us back to the socialist, cultured, traditional and religious India where the society was ruled by so many religious dignitaries like Gautama Buddha, Mahavira, Manu, Basaveshwara, etc. The connections of literary movements are related with the social movements of contemporary society. There were four strata of society like Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudras. But when these four strata started fainting then the socialist movements started taking shape. The men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Lokmanya Tilak, G. G. Agarkar, Jyotiba Phule, Shahu Maharaj and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar began to speak against the irrational practices. Raja Ram Mohan Roy fought against the 'Sati Pratha' whereas Shahu, Phule, Ambedkar fought against untouchability in an orthodox society. These great socialists not only opposed it but also expressed their opposition through their writings. These problems became the subject matter of their writing. The literature became the mouthpiece for the contemporary problems.

The literature started to present the social, economical, religious, psychological and sexual aspects of the society. The Renaissance, in India, started with Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The change of Indian's dogma, rites and rituals started with the arrival of detest to Sati-pratha by Roy and Lord Bentinck abolished it from Indian roots.

Then, the socialist movements started to take roots in the Indian soil. Raja Ram Mohan Roy wanted India to become a new and modern country, and the Indians to become a virile new

people by achieving a new integration of our traditional strength with the new scientific disciplines from the west. He was the first man who introduced an autobiography in India and afterwards men like Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi wrote their autobiographies. He was called as the first prose writer in English.

The literature then is divided into two categories that is of pre-independence period and post independence period. This production comes under the broader realm of post colonial, colonial literature, the production from previously colonized countries such as India. Indian English fiction is at least a century and half old which is the gift of English education. The novel is the importation from the western countries. The Sanskrit literature has a prose fiction of which Dandin's Dasa Kumara Charita and Subandhu's Vasavadutta are some of the noted examples. The earliest specimens of Indian English fiction were tales rather than novels, but their use of fantasy shows their links with the ancient Indian tradition, in spite of the fact that their subject matter is contemporary. One of the noted novelists, Raja Rao, deals with the plight of untouchables in his novel Untouchable class. With the arrival of these novelists, the elements like caste system, religiousness started to appear in fictions.

K. Nagarjan's Athvar's House is a family chronicle and covers economic vicissitudes in the life of joint family relationships, clash between orthodoxy and new ideas. U. R. Ananthmurthy is a contemporary writer and critic in the Kannada Language as well as considered as one of the pioneers of Navya Movement. He has been awarded Janpith Award for his contribution in Kannada language, and also been awarded Padma Bhushan by the Government of India. He was born in Melige, Trithalhali, a Taluka of Shimoga district. He received his education in a traditional Sanskrit School. He started his career as a professor and instructor in 1970 in English Department, University of Mysore. In 1993, he was elected as the president of Sahitya Academy. His works have been translated into several Indian and European languages. His main works include Samskara, Bhava, Bhartipura and Avasthe. His literary works deal with psychological aspects of people in different situations, times and circumstances. His writing supposedly analyzes aspects ranging from challenges and changes faced by Brahmin families of Karnataka.

Most of his novels portray a reaction of individuals to situations that are unusual and artificial. Results of influences on change of Hindu societies of India and clashes due to such influences between a father and a son, husband and wife, father and daughter and finally the fine love that flows beneath all such clashes are portrayed by him. He depicted the socio-cultural elements of his time. Though he was born in Brahmin family, he was against the Brahmin rites and rituals. He has discussed caste system, culture, religious rules, traditions etc. He portrays ambivalent relationship, handed down cultural values and new values of changing world. He has discussed the religious matters and contemporary Hindu themes. He has also elaborated the issues related with untouchables, complexities of caste system and myth of social justice. He also portrays the tale of mystery, passion, spiritual exploration as well as mysteries of present and past.

Besides, he has also thrown light on the contemporary political movements in India. In some of his works, he has explored zealotry to make sense of turbulence, tensions and

contradictions of his times. He has been deeply reflecting upon the nature of modern civilization. He has been attempting to explore the impact of liberalization, globalization and privatization especially on our psyche. He handles themes in his novels in such a way that they are both, current as well as interesting and draws full attention of the readers. He makes his readers to think about these problems and their realities.

In the Indian History hierarchy of caste has been an important issue related with hegemony, and power dynamics. Over the year's social hierarchy have maneuvered to gain and retain the supremacy of social domain by using and appropriating, theories, discourses, sources of knowledge, and ideologies, which have been the effectively and primarily responsible for the marginalization of the people especially belonging to category of powerless and low caste.

But there has been rise in the discourse of marginalized people be it Dalits, women or downtrodden tribes, on the other hand these groups like Dalits and marginalized women not only contesting the domination and supremacy of higher class but also giving and offering the counter discourse and canon. We are claiming to rein the whole world in this 21st century but Caste systemic a disease, blight, hindrance and what not which mars all our claims. By so called establishments: religious or socio-cultural, this system is exploiting women and low castes in numerous ways from not only decades but from centuries. Murthy is much successful in portraying the voice of abused and downtrodden people by using his literary apparatus be it satire, humor or irony.

U.R. Ananthamurthy, one among those brilliant novelist who won the worldwide fame, his novel *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), originally written in Kannada, translated by A.K Ramanujan into English, has led its author to the presidency of the Sahitya Akademi. Ananthamurthy, representative of the "Navya" movement is recognised as an iconic and important writer in India as well as in abroad. In his works he examines well the themes like caste system, traditions, religion, changing values with the changing world and cultural value system. He has finely depicted the elements of socio-culture crystal clearly. The notable event in his life is that although born in Brahman family but he never accepted their rites and rituals, he was always against them.

Caste system, religion, rules, culture, tradition, rituals and rites were the basic and fundamental issues to discuss in his works. The important issue discussed by him is untouchability, a complex caste system. With the mystery of present and past he also depicts and portrays the tale of passion, mystery, spiritual exploration very artistically. Besides there are so many important social issues he has depicted: zealotry towards the turbulence, contradictions, tensions and contemporary social disorders.

Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man (1965) by U.R. Ananthamurthy is a novel set in a small village of Karnataka, representing a fake world of high caste Brahmins. Dejecting the beauty of life, their attitude towards life is based upon false, duplicitous and exaggerated thoughts. An unexpected question when arises in their present, they find answer in their holy books; therefore the contemporary questions remain unanswered. Majority of the people are very money-oriented that the hunger of a share of the dead man's assets is primary, while his

cremation is the secondary one. The original meanings of the Vedas is eliminated and overlooked. The circle of 'karma' is still and it moves where, it breaks the fake boundaries of the unfilled rituals of casteism. The Brahmins, belonging to high caste perform, a ritual called 'samskara' for the purification of soul, but here the question occurs – Are they themselves pure? Every human activity is governed by caste and creed, starting from birth to death. The grim reality is that death can't also prevent the dominance and continuation of these rituals. The word 'samskara' - which is also a title, is in the centre to this novel. One meaning of this word is the refinement of soul; it is to make a human holy, and it is a decontamination of the dead body. The name of that village in the novel is Durvasapura and Naranappa is an effective threat to the Brahmin community of this village, as he strictly abhors the traditional Brahmin values, cherished by all.

The novel *Samskara* is an ideal example of the performance of tradition, caste system, class conflict and the lust for physical relations. The protagonist of the novel has illegitimate relations with a lower class girl Chandri. The novelist presented the human relations in a complex way. Another important character in the novel is Praneshacharya who is a representative of the bold practicing of class and caste conflict, the performance of rituals in each and every life activities. He tries to give solution about the cremation and how it should be performed. The novel ends but does not conclude. In *Bhartipura*, the society was governed by the upper class people where the lower class people were not permitted to enter in the temple. They were kept outside and were not permitted even to perform the Puja in the temple. The tradition of performing rites which continuous from years is in the hands of a typical class. But the protagonist opposes the tradition running down, the right limited to upper class and caste. The practicing of cultural elements are skillfully presented in *Bhava* like preparing food in *madi*, use of rangoli on special occasions, and eating food on banana leaves. *Sitamma* who is representative of the strict following of these rules and regulations in day to day practices, whereas *Avasthe* deeply focuses on the social issues like class and caste conflict. The hero, *Krishnappa*, belongs to a lower class. He is part and parcel of socialist politics and strongly opposes the Marxist principles in Indian society. The problem of untouchability is the chief subject matter of his novels because each character in his novels that are *Chandri* in *Samskara*, *Holyyyaru* people in *Bhartipura*, *Gangu* and *Prasad* in *Bhava* and *Krishnappa* in *Avasthe* are representatives of particular class. In every novel, the protagonist of the novel brings these untouchables in the light and represents a severe problem of Indian society. *Ananthamurthy* presented the social problem of illegitimate relations, love, lust, sex in his novels. The man like *Praneshcharya* could not control his feelings; lastly, he surrenders to *Chandri*. He kept celibacy but lastly handovers everything to her. Thus, the novelist has woven these elements, characters in such a way that they represent the Indian social and cultural background. The trilogy of U.R. Ananthamurthy viz. *Samskara*, *Avasthe* and *Bhartipura* are based on the concept of social justice. In every novel, he tried to concentrate the readers' attention towards the contemporary social and cultural problems of India.

Samskara is acclaimed as a modern classic which holds mirror up to social evils like untouchability, casteism, ritualism, and disintegration in Hindu community. It presents the trajectory of religious crisis and cultural entanglement in a Brahmin agharhara. V. S. Naipaul, a prominent writer of today's time, aptly described *Ananthamurthy's* portrayal of Hindu society in

his controversial book, *India: A wounded Civilization* (1977): Knowingly or unknowingly, Ananthamurthy has portrayed a barbaric civilization, where the books, the laws, are buttressed by magic, and where a too elaborate social organization is unquicken by intellect or creativity (except to the self in its climb to salvation). In order to contextualize V.S. Naipaul's above comment on Samskara, one has to understand the stark reality of notorious social system, Chaturvarnyavavastha, which is the foundation for Hindu society. Ananthamurthy's Samskara is a touchstone in the socially conscious literature. The novel is a classic case study for the manifestation of ill-effects of Hindu dogmatism and caste system in the society. It depicts a vivid picture of Hindu society wherein the prominence of Brahmins in the society is shown and lower-caste Dalits are pushed to the bottom of social hierarchy. In the novel, Brahmins are placed at the highest pedestal, and considered to be the spiritual guides, teachers, and most respected members in the Hindu society, whereas Dalits are supposed to perform menial duties and serve all in the society. Brahmins, in the novel, have been shown to be indulging in all immoral practices. Samskara presents a miniaturized world of Indian Hindu Society. It highlights the complexities of caste system which is based on the Chaturvaranadharm of Vedas. The reference of inception of Chaturvarnyavavastha in Hindu society can be found in the religious text book like, Purusha Sukta, the ninetieth hymn of the tenth mandala of the Rig Veda: The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made. His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was produced.

(ब्राह्मणो ेह स्यामुखमं रसीत। ब्राह्मणं रजानयं कं तय। ऊरूतदस्यायद्वैशयं। पादयं रंशं
 ाद्र अजं रयतय ||12||) (Griffith, 569, English Translation)

These verses prescribe a set of divine codes for the constitution of Society. It is believed that there are four Varnas, i.e., Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. In these codes, Purusha is shown to be a symbolic and personified figure for the universe. He has been given human attributes, which form the constitution of Society in the form of four Varnas. This suggests that the Brahmin was his mouth, the Kshatriya formed his arms, the Vaishyas were from his thighs, and the Shudra came from his feet. This notion of Varnavyavastha also appears in other religious texts like, Bhagwat Gita the Apastamba Dharma Sutra, Vashishtha Dharma Sutra, the Vishnu Purana, the Harivansha Purana, the Satpatha Brahmin and the Manu Smriti etc. Later on, this proposed division of castes transfused a sense of ascending superiority and descending inferiority in Hindus. It promoted faulty endogamous practices, and put restrictions on sharing food, and gave birth to the obnoxious practice of untouchability which has been the worst sin committed against the humanity. It has been marked that horrendous crimes have been committed using caste based discriminatory practices in the name religion which were supported by obscurantist dictums, puranic stories and religious myths.

One of the greatest intellectuals of modern time, Dr. Ambedkar came down heavily on the divisive caste system, and appealed masses to denounce Vedic literature which supports such type of human degradation in the name of religion. In his well-known speech, Annihilation of Caste which was written for the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal of Lahore, Dr. Ambedkar criticized the disintegrated feature of Hindu society: There is no Hindu consciousness of kind. In every Hindu the consciousness that exists is the consciousness of his caste. That is the reason why the Hindus cannot be said to form a society or a nation. There are however many Indians whose patriotism

does not permit them to admit that Indians are not a nation, that they are only an amorphous mass of people. Dr. Ambedkar describes Hindu society as „an amorphous mass of people“ who are not religious by the principles of morality or human values, but they are caste-conscious groups hankering for their selfish goals. Like Dr. Ambedkar, Ananthamurthy attempts to present a realistic picture of the caste-conscious disintegrated society. It depicts how Hindu obscurantism has failed to create a society which values humanity and egalitarian principles, like Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Ananthamurthy as a rational Brahmin, portrays the hollowness in the religious claims of conservative Brahmins who believe that all human problems could be solved by performing unscientific rituals.

Anantha Murthy has ended up with the naked truth that women are exploited and marginalised be it low caste or upper caste. Women in Samskara have no powers to voice their feelings. They are mere machines to produce children and do their house chorus. Males dominate financially, equipped with freedom to keep illicit relations. Society has become an insecure place for women because of man’s lust. Mr Ishar Singh has rightly said “Evil emanates from Man’s nature. God is not a source of evil. Satan’s existence is not denied but that is a power created by God to test a man. Man’s will is the only source of evil. Man encounters in his mind seven social sins of sensuality, dishonesty, intemperance, anger, talkativeness, malice and illness and he is required by Judaic Law to avoid these sins.

Conclusion

Ananthamurthy is concerned about the steep decline in the morality of Brahmins who treat women and members of other caste and community inhumanly. The Brahmins are seen to be using oppressive methods in the name religious dogma and dominating voiceless subalterns. They themselves are highly disrespectful to the basic moral values. Ananthamurthy realizes that religious fundamentalism is creating obstacles in the progress of human society. In short, the writer directly or indirectly hinting to an urgent need of revamp in Hindu society to prevent moral decline in Hindu society. Thus, he has attempted to exhibit the vices and follies of religious dogmatism through this novel with intent to eradicate social evils like untouchability, casteism, and communalism from the society.

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