

Samskara by U. R. Ananthamurthy

An Introduction

Published in 1965 in Kannada language, the novel *Samsakara* became an instant success and was made into a film in 1970 which won the National film Award for Best Feature Film. The novel was translated into English by A. K. Ramanujan. As the very title of the book denotes it concerns the religious rituals that play a central role in the Hindu way of life. In this particular instance the ritual concerned is the performance of the last rites of a dead man. Even the subtitle of A. K. Ramanujan's translation is 'A Rite for a Dead man'. The word Samskara has multiple connotations in Hinduism and U. R. Ananthamurthy deploys these various shades of meaning in the novel, giving it a multilayered resonance.

The novel is located in a remote South-Indian village named Durvasapur, and revolves around the Brahmin quarter of the village, commonly referred to as *agrahara*. The novel begins with a crisis in the life of the community brought about by the death of a Brahmin named Naranappa. This Brahmin has flouted all the norms that regulate the lives of Brahmins in the *agrahara* and has almost renounced the central tenets of Brahminical conduct. For instance, he is given to excessive drinking, eats meat and mixes up freely with lower castes and Muslims. He has also desecrated the sacred temple pond by catching fish from it. However, the most flagrant violation of the Brahmin lifestyle comes in his decision to cast off his lawful wife and take Chandri, a lower caste woman as a concubine. He shifts to her house and lives with her. This is considered a sacrilege among the Madhava sect of Brahmins who constitute the *agrahara*. However, despite his repeated defiance of the rules he has not been excommunicated and is still a practicing Brahmin.

His death however, brings a different problem altogether. As his fast decaying corpse awaits cremation, none of the Brahmins from his or neighbouring community are willing to perform the funeral rites of Naranappa and this brings an unprecedented crisis in the life of the community. Touching the defiled body of Naranappa would soil whosoever performed the rites. Another immediate problem is that as long as the dead body is not disposed ritually, the other Brahmins can neither cook, nor eat and worship. To render the moral quandary of the Brahmins more complex, Chandri offers all her gold ornaments to anyone who offers to cremate Naranappa and perform the last rites. Human greed and the responsibilities enjoined by caste clash and the Brahmins are morally torn between the two as their wives insist on their performing the funeral rituals. The offer of ornaments further complicates the issue as no Brahmin wants to be branded greedy.

Seized of this problem, the Brahmins approach Praneshacharya, their spiritual leader for a possible solution to this problem. Praneshacharya, though in his late thirties, has thoroughly

mastered the scriptures and is respected as the wisest among his community. He has lived a life of exemplary austerity and strict ritualism. He is totally committed to his invalid wife to whom he has been married for twenty years. He tends to her needs with tender care and refuses to remarry, and has never known a life of carnal pleasure.

Faced with this unique problem, Praneshacharya consults all his books of wisdom, the Vedas and the Upanishads but finds no answer out of this moral dilemma. Time is running out and an immediate resolution to the crisis must be sought. Feeling let down by the Scriptures he finally goes for instruction and enlightenment to the temple of God Maruti where he goes everyday to worship. He prays and expostulates but to no avail and he returns disappointed from here as well.

However, on his way back to home he meets Chandri who touches his feet and pleads with him to find a solution to the issue. Their bodies touch and when Praneshacharya wakes up from stupor he realizes that he has made love to Chandri in the heat of the moment. He is utterly ashamed of his lapse and feels defrauded of all his moral excellence rigorously cultivated over decades. In the meantime, Chandri makes hectic parleys with other non-Brahmin castes who all refuse to take the challenge. Ultimately, her efforts bear fruit when the Muslim fish-seller Ahmad Bari rises to the occasion and takes away the corpse and disposes it off.

Praneshacharya's wife dies in the meanwhile and he leaves the village on foot for an unknown place to make penance.

