

The Samskara of Praneshacharya: Ritual, Existential Crisis, and Embodied Rebirth in U. R. Ananthamurthy's 'Samskara'

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Abstract

U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1965) is a significant work of modern Kannada literature that interrogates the relationship between ritual, caste, morality, embodiment, and individual freedom. The death of Naranappa, a Brahmin who has rejected the orthodox practices of the agrahara, creates a ritual and ethical crisis that exposes the contradictions within the community's religious and social order. At the centre of this crisis is Praneshacharya, the most learned Brahmin of Durvasapura, whose identity is founded upon scriptural knowledge, ritual purity, and ascetic self-discipline. This article argues that Praneshacharya's crisis should not be understood merely as a spiritual fall or moral failure. Rather, his encounter with Naranappa's world and with Chandri initiates a process of existential self-recognition in which inherited identities and unquestioned assumptions are destabilised. The article examines the multiple meanings of *samskara*—ritual, purification, formation, and transformation—and demonstrates how Ananthamurthy relocates the concept from the sphere of communal ritual to the sphere of individual becoming. Drawing upon existentialist concepts of freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and embodied existence, as well as scholarship on caste, gender, and modernity in the novel, the article contends that Praneshacharya's transformation represents an unresolved but significant movement from ritual authority toward ethical self-awareness.

Keywords: U. R. Ananthamurthy; *Samskara*; Praneshacharya; existentialism; caste; ritual; embodiment; modernity; Kannada literature

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I. Introduction: The Decaying Agrahara and the Crisis of Meaning

U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* is situated in the fictional Brahmin settlement of Durvasapura and centres on the death of Naranappa, a Brahmin who has openly rejected the conventions of orthodox Brahminical life. His consumption of meat and alcohol, sexual relationship with Chandri, and rejection of conventional ritual authority place him outside the normative structure of the agrahara. His death therefore produces a crisis that is simultaneously religious, social, ethical, and personal. The question of who should perform his funeral rites becomes a larger question concerning the validity and limits of the social order itself (Ananthamurthy).

The novel's treatment of this crisis has been widely interpreted in relation to caste, modernity, and Brahmin identity. Krishna Manavalli observes that *Samskara* is deeply concerned with caste and gender while simultaneously exploring the self-fashioning of the Brahmin subject in a changing social environment. Manavalli further argues that the novel's representation of Brahmin identity remains ambivalent because its critique of orthodoxy does not entirely escape the structures it seeks to question (Manavalli 133–50).

The decaying body of Naranappa becomes the material centre of the crisis. The Brahmins cannot resolve the problem through their existing rules because Naranappa occupies an unstable position: he is biologically a Brahmin but has symbolically rejected Brahminical norms. His corpse therefore exposes the inadequacy of a system that depends upon fixed categories of purity and pollution. The crisis reveals the distance between formal religious knowledge and lived moral experience.

The Polysemy of Samskara: Ritual and Transformation

The title *Samskara* carries several meanings. It may refer to a ritual or rite of passage, to purification, and more broadly to formation or refinement. In the context of Ananthamurthy's novel, these meanings overlap but also come into tension. The immediate *samskara* concerns the funeral rites of Naranappa. At a deeper level, however, the novel presents the transformation of Praneshacharya himself.

The inability of the Brahmins to perform Naranappa's funeral rites exposes the limitations of ritualism when ritual rules are separated from ethical responsibility. The community possesses elaborate prescriptions

concerning purity, pollution, and religious duty, but these prescriptions fail to provide an adequate response to an unexpected human situation.

Praneshacharya initially turns toward scripture and divine authority for guidance. Yet the expected answer does not arrive. His frustration eventually becomes a recognition that inherited knowledge cannot automatically resolve every human dilemma. The problem is transformed from “What does the scripture command?” to “How should I act when certainty is unavailable?”

The title consequently acquires an ironic dimension. The community seeks to complete Naranappa’s samskara through a prescribed funeral ceremony, but the more significant samskara occurs within Praneshacharya. The ritual that cannot initially be completed becomes the catalyst for psychological and ethical transformation.

Praneshacharya’s Existential Crisis

Praneshacharya’s crisis becomes increasingly existential after his encounter with Chandri. His previously stable identity as scholar, ascetic, husband, and religious authority begins to collapse. His questions—“Where am I?”, “How did I get here?”, and “Who is this woman?”—express not simply physical confusion but a deeper disorientation of identity (Ananthamurthy 85–86).

The significance of these questions lies in their simplicity. Praneshacharya, who has spent his life acquiring authoritative knowledge, suddenly confronts an experience that cannot be fully explained by his intellectual categories. The person who once interpreted reality for others is forced to confront his own uncertainty.

The novel can therefore be read alongside existentialist concerns with freedom, responsibility, and authenticity. However, it is important not to reduce *Samskara* to a European existentialist framework. Ananthamurthy’s treatment of existential crisis emerges from a specifically Indian social and religious context. Sharanya D. G. argues that the novel uses myth and traditional cultural structures critically, creating a dialogue between inherited cultural forms and modern consciousness (D. G.).

Praneshacharya’s dilemma also reveals the limitations of purely intellectual knowledge. His scriptural mastery has provided him with social authority, but it has not prepared him for the unpredictability of embodied existence.

Chandri, Embodiment, and the Disruption of Orthodoxy

Chandri occupies a particularly important position in Praneshacharya’s transformation. She is situated outside the normative Brahminical order and is initially regarded by the aghara through categories of caste and sexual morality. Yet her actions repeatedly challenge the moral superiority claimed by the Brahmin community. Her generosity and practical concern contrast with the self-interest displayed by several of the Brahmin men.

Her role requires a gender-sensitive reading. Sharon Pillai observes that Chandri’s significance in the novel is deeply connected to questions of gender, materiality, sexuality, and the representation of women. This perspective prevents an overly romantic interpretation of Chandri as merely the woman who liberates Praneshacharya. Her character is simultaneously given agency and constrained by a narrative structure that repeatedly associates women with the body and materiality (Pillai).

Praneshacharya’s encounter with Chandri destabilises his attempt to define himself entirely through ascetic discipline. His sexual experience creates an awareness of desire and vulnerability that his previous ascetic life had attempted to control.

Praneshacharya subsequently recognises the importance of personal responsibility: “Even if I lost control, the responsibility to decide was still mine” (Ananthamurthy 98). The statement marks an important shift in consciousness. Instead of explaining his action entirely through fate, temptation, or external circumstances, Praneshacharya begins to recognise himself as an agent responsible for his choices.

Freedom, Responsibility, and Authenticity

Praneshacharya’s transformation may be productively understood through existentialist concepts of freedom and responsibility. In *Samskara*, however, this issue is complicated by caste, religious duty, social expectation, and inherited identity.

Praneshacharya has initially lived according to a prescribed identity. His status as an exemplary Brahmin gives his life a predetermined structure. He is expected to embody religious authority and maintain ritual purity. His encounter with Naranappa and Chandri interrupts this structure and makes individual choice unavoidable.

Yet the novel does not celebrate unrestricted freedom. Praneshacharya’s new awareness is accompanied by guilt, uncertainty, and responsibility. This is what makes his transformation existential rather than simply rebellious. Naranappa rejects orthodoxy through defiance, whereas Praneshacharya is compelled to confront the consequences of his choices.

The distinction between the two characters is therefore important. Naranappa represents a radical rejection of the agrahara's values, while Praneshacharya initially represents their highest intellectual and religious expression. Their opposition gradually becomes a dialogue within Praneshacharya himself.

Caste, Orthodoxy, and the Limits of Reform

One of the most important dimensions of Samskara is its critique of caste hierarchy. The crisis surrounding Naranappa's funeral demonstrates how caste functions not merely as a social classification but as a system that regulates food, sexuality, bodily contact, ritual participation, and social belonging.

Recent scholarship emphasises that the novel's critique of caste is complex. Prasad reads the novel as a critique of caste hierarchy and untouchability, particularly through Praneshacharya's intellectual and existential crisis. At the same time, Manavalli points to the ambivalence of the novel's representation of Brahmin identity. Together, these perspectives suggest that Samskara exposes contradictions within a Brahminical social structure while examining the difficulty of transforming consciousness produced by that structure (Prasad; Manavalli).

The novel also demonstrates that caste cannot be separated from gender. Chandri and other women occupy positions in which their bodies become sites of social regulation. The Brahminical order defines women through expectations concerning sexuality, purity, marriage, and social status. Pillai's analysis shows that Chandri's representation simultaneously challenges and reproduces certain gendered assumptions (Pillai).

Tradition and Modernity

Samskara is also a novel about the conflict between tradition and modernity. However, the opposition is not simply between an old, irrational world and a new, rational one. The novel presents both tradition and modernity as unstable categories.

Neha Punia argues that Samskara negotiates the complex relationship between tradition and modernity within the Indian novel rather than merely reproducing a Western modernist model. Similarly, D. G. demonstrates that Ananthamurthy uses myth and traditional structures critically, creating a dialogue between inherited cultural forms and modern consciousness (Punia; D. G.).

Praneshacharya cannot simply abandon tradition. His intellectual formation is inseparable from the religious world that produced him. His transformation therefore involves reinterpretation rather than complete rejection. The challenge is to discover whether inherited concepts such as dharma can remain meaningful when confronted with circumstances that exceed rigid prescriptions.

The novel consequently occupies an important position within Kannada modernism. Manavalli identifies the relationship between postcolonial modernism, caste, gender, and Brahmin identity as central to the text (Manavalli 133–50).

The Body as a Site of Knowledge

A particularly significant dimension of the novel is the role of the body. Naranappa's corpse is the first body that disrupts the agrahara's conceptual system. The Brahmins can discuss ritual purity, but they cannot escape the material fact of decomposition. The corpse therefore forces abstract categories to confront physical reality.

Praneshacharya's encounter with Chandri introduces a second bodily dimension. His own body becomes a source of knowledge that cannot be entirely subordinated to scriptural authority. His sexual experience creates an awareness of desire and vulnerability that his previous ascetic life had attempted to control.

The body therefore becomes epistemological: it is not merely an object within the story but a means through which characters encounter truths that cannot be fully articulated through ritual discourse.

Toward an Embodied Samskara

Praneshacharya's transformation should not be described simply as a conversion from orthodoxy to rebellion. Such an interpretation would reproduce the binary between tradition and modernity that the novel itself complicates.

Instead, his transformation can be understood as an embodied samskara. He moves from a position in which identity is primarily determined by inherited social and religious categories toward a more uncertain consciousness in which choice and responsibility become unavoidable.

This transformation remains incomplete. The conclusion does not present Praneshacharya as a fully liberated individual. His return is marked by uncertainty, and the reader is not given a definitive statement about what his future will be. This ambiguity is essential to the novel's modernist character. Transformation is presented not as the achievement of a final state but as an ongoing process of self-formation.

In this sense, the title Samskara refers simultaneously to the funeral of Naranappa, the crisis of the agrahara, and the transformation of Praneshacharya.

Contemporary Relevance

The continuing significance of Samskara lies in its refusal to provide simple answers to questions of tradition, identity, caste, morality, and freedom. The social structures represented in the novel belong to a particular historical context, yet the questions they raise remain relevant to contemporary debates about caste hierarchy, religious authority, social exclusion, and individual autonomy.

The novel demonstrates the danger of treating inherited categories as permanently fixed. Caste identity, religious authority, gender roles, and moral expectations are shown to be social structures that become unstable when confronted with human experience.

At the same time, Samskara warns against replacing one form of certainty with another. Praneshacharya's transformation does not produce an uncomplicated modern identity. Instead, it leaves him in a state of uncertainty in which he must confront the consequences of his own choices.

II. Conclusion: The Enduring Rite of Self-Formation

U. R. Ananthamurthy's Samskara transforms a seemingly specific question about the funeral rites of a deceased Brahmin into a profound exploration of caste, ritual, identity, embodiment, and existential responsibility. The death of Naranappa destabilises the religious and social order of Durvasapura, while Praneshacharya's inability to find a satisfactory answer through scripture exposes the limitations of a purely ritualistic understanding of dharma.

His encounter with Chandri represents the decisive moment in this crisis. Rather than interpreting the encounter simply as moral failure, the novel can be read as presenting it as an experience through which Praneshacharya becomes conscious of his embodied existence and his responsibility for choice. His transformation is therefore neither complete liberation nor simple collapse. It is an unfinished process of self-formation.

The concept of samskara consequently moves beyond funeral ritual. It becomes a metaphor for the transformation of consciousness. Naranappa's corpse demands a ritual that the Brahmin community cannot perform, while Praneshacharya undergoes a more profound internal samskara. The old certainty of ritual authority is disrupted, and a new but uncertain ethical consciousness emerges.

The novel's enduring power lies precisely in this ambiguity. Samskara neither completely rejects tradition nor uncritically celebrates modernity. Instead, it places the individual at the difficult intersection of inherited structures and lived experience. Praneshacharya's journey demonstrates that genuine transformation requires not the denial of the body or the abandonment of responsibility, but the courage to confront uncertainty and assume responsibility for one's choices.

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