



Satire in *Samskara* by Anant Murthi

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In the general sense, satire means criticism of life. The purpose of satire is to ridicule frailties in human customs and institutions and by causing laughter, to inspire their reform. Through satire, the writers condemn the vices and follies of their age in their writings. The satirist uses such weapons as humour, wit, irony, mockery, ridicule etc. The satirist is a man who tries to correct, censure and ridicule the follies and vices of the society and thus to bring contempt and decision upon aberrations from a desirable and civilized norm. It is a kind of protest, a sublimation and a refinement. It is an exposure of human weaknesses, shortcomings, follies and absurdities.

Samskara, a great work by Anant Murthy and translated by A.K. Ramanujan in English, is highly satirical. *Samskara* holds a clear mirror of the Brahmin community who live in agraahara, a narrow street in which Brahmins belong to the Madhwa community.

Here Durvasapura stands for a typical Indian village where the Brahmins of Indian villages suffer from superiority complex. They believe that they are greater and more religious than the other caste people of India. In fact, they are utterly decadent, narrow minded, greedy, selfish and jealous. They do not even understand why they follow rules. In fact, they do not care to understand. They are afraid that if they do not follow the rules, disasters will fall upon them. They feel safe as long as they follow rules and traditions.

The novel raises an important question – What is Samskara in true sense? The whole novel tries to find out the answer of this question by exposing the hypocrisy of the Brahmin community in a very satirical way. There is a kind of confrontation between the community, tradition and modernity, conventional and unconventional, conservation and modernism and also between the various castes. And these are the realities of practical life.

The protagonist of the novel, a traditional Brahmin named Praneshacharya is an Acharya of the village and Brahmin community of Agraahara who reads Vedas, puranas and has a lot of knowledge about Indian myths and legends. He studied in Kashi and becomes a pundit. He is a scholar, so all the power is in his hands. Whatever he speaks, it becomes a part of gospel for the other people of Durvasapura. “Acharya, you are our greatest scholar; your word is vedic gospel to us” (5). The other Brahmins have no faith in themselves, but they believe that their guru is like a godly figure for them. In this way, they have a blind faith in him. As described here:

Wait till Praneshacharya gives you a decision. You may do the wrong thing. The guru will excommunicate you (Murthi: 1978, 4).

The whole book is a great satire on Brahminism and its orthodox rules and customs. In the beginning of the novel, there is a satire on regular bath as Brahmins greatly believe in bath. At every occasion bath is an inevitable element for them. Their daily routine begins with bath. In the evening they take another bath. Down, twilight prayers, cooking and medicines for wife and crossing the stream again to the Maruti temple for worship, bath has its own place. That is the unfailing daily routine. The Brahmin life is bath oriented. Naranappa does everything against this daily routine. and so his character becomes very complex.

The whole system of funeral is also satirical which shows the rigidity of Brahmins. On the occasion of the death of Naranappa, Garudacharya runs from one house to another and informs about the death of Naranappa. The news of the death of Naranappa spreads like a wild fire along the house of agraahara. Doors and windows are shut with children inside. And they become happy that no Brahmin has yet eaten. According to them, alive Naranappa was an enemy but dead, a provider of meals as corpse, a problem, a nuisance. After his death, there is consolation too. They express:

We agraahara people had a bad fight with Naranappa, we didn't exchange even water and rice (Murthi : 1978, 18).

After the death of Naranappa, all the Brahmins gather near the house of Praneshacharya. As per the Acharya's order, Naranappa's death rite – samskara has to be performed. He has no children; therefore someone else has to do it. Here is a satire that a person who died without son is unable to get proper death – rite. Then Praneshacharya follows the ancient holy books and says that any relative of Naranappa can perform death – rite – Samskara of him. The dead Naranappa was a relative of Garudacharya and Lakshmannacharya but at present, they are unwilling to perform his death – rite because of the quarrel between two families.



Everybody tries to escape for the responsibility of Naranappa's cremation. Pranescharya tries to persuade them that according to the holy books, except the Brahmins nobody has right to touch Naranappa's dead body. Isn't it satirical that among the Brahmins, nobody wishes to take responsibility of Naranappa's death rite and the people of other caste are not able to do it. Of course, at last, Chandri and her Muslim friends perform the funeral.

The attitude of the Brahmins towards the low caste people is highly satirical. Here, Chandri stands for the low caste community and Brahmins believe that they will be polluted if they talk with Chandri and so they have to take bath. They could not even eat the meal prepared by the low caste people like Chandri. Only Naranappa ate all that Chandri prepared. It shows typical brahmin's attitude to the low caste people. The attitude of the people towards low caste people is shown in the following statement:

Chhi, chhi, chhi, don't be too rash Acharya. O' no, a Brahmin isn't lost because he talks to a low prostitute (Murthi: 1978, 5).

Anant Murthy has used human body as a symbol of plague which has visited the village. It is in fact a disease among the Brahmin community. The plague is in the minds of the orthodox Brahmin people.

Even among the Brahmins, there are various categories like higher class Brahmins and lower class Brahmins. According to the Brahmins of Durvasapura, they are higher than the Brahmins of Parijatpura as their orthodoxy is not as strict as the Brahmins of Durvasapura. They believe that the Brahmins of Parijatpura are hybrid Brahmins. All the groups have their own Acharyas and there are arguments among all these Acharyas and Pranescharya becomes super pundit because he won honours at every seat of learning in the south and so he is called as "Crest Jewel of Vedic Learning".

Our Acharya has won all sorts of arguments with all the super pundits, yours and ours, won honours at every seat of learning in the south, fifteen lace shawls and silver platters (Murthi: 1978, 6).

It is really satirical that though he is a super pundit, he is not able to solve the problem of the funeral of Naranappa. In this way, his degree is useless. Through his example, Anant Murthy exposes the hypocrisy of Acharya .

Chandri, a low caste woman worships Acharya as a God because she believes that only Acharya Pranescharya is able to find out proper solution of Naranappa's death rite. She, therefore, falls at his feet and the behaviour of Pranescharya with Chandri is like an ordinary human being's behaviour. As the author describes:

At that time Chandri's breast touched his knee. The buttons of the blouse tore open. The Acharya bent down to bless her with his hands tightly. She pressed them to her breasts now beating like a pair of doves. Touching full breasts, he had never touched Pranescharya who felt faint. As the strength in his legs was ebbing, Chandri sat near the Acharya. She leaned him against her breasts. Then she looks of her sari. She spread it on the ground and lay on it hugging Pranescharya (Murthi : 1978, 63).

A man like a pillar of whole Brahmin community behaves in this way is not only satirical but also shocking. Through this event, Anant Murthy wants to expose the so called leading person's hypocrisy. In the lives of these types of persons, there is a great difference between what they actually are and how they behave. The movement of the whole book is always torn between Dharma and Karma. Satire emerges between what the Brahmins believe – Dharma and how they behave – Karma. The difference between belief and behaviour produces not only humour but also satire which shows hypocrisy. The Brahmins thought that they perform all these activities for getting Moksha, for the betterment of the people. They blindly believe that if you want to get Moksha, you have to give a cow to a Brahmin, spend money for meals and make pilgrimage. But, it is really satirical that one cannot get Moksha by doing all these earthly activities.

Not only Brahmin men but also Brahmin women are orthodox. Though the Brahmin wives are ideal for the other caste women, curse Chandri as "an evil witch". They are greedy and jealous when Chandri presents a heap of gold for the cremation of Naranappa.

The description of meal is also ironical. The Brahmins are made for meals. Meal is everything for them. They can do anything for meal. Here, the description of Dasacharya and his eagerness for meal is quite amusing which proves that the life of Brahmins is meal oriented. As Anant Murthy points out:

Dasacharya lived entirely on the meals that Brahmins get at death rites and anniversaries. He would walk ten miles for such a meal any day (Murthi: 1978, 49).

To join army was also a great sin in those days. The Brahmin people of that time believe that if any Brahmin joins the army, he was a sinner. Garudacharya's son joins the army and so other Brahmins believe that he has left samskara and committed sin. As quoted here:

He is in the army, he'll have no baths, no prayers and they'll force him to eat meat now (Murthi: 1978, 28).



Satire emerges when the Brahmins behave like great and superior persons and the situation of their houses is worst. In their houses, there are cockroaches in the butter milk shelves and fat rats in the store rooms. This situation is found in almost all the Brahmin's houses. A Brahmin who is the greatest religious person of society and the situation of his house is so dirty that how can we call him a real Brahmin?

The novelist compares the hunger of Brahmins with the hot street of agrahara and describes that the Agrahara Street was so hot that you could popcorn on it. Actually the street of agrahara is not hot but the stomach of Brahmins is very "Hot". Here the stomach is personified with the hot streets. The Brahmins become weak with hunger which produces a lot of humour. Through humour, the author exposes the hunger of Brahmins for meal.

The Brahmins of agrahara compare Naranappa with a snake which is quite satirical. According to the Brahmins, the snake is twice born, so they have to perform rites for it and Brahmins should not eat till the end of the rites. Similarly, Naranappa is a Brahmin and so they have to perform the rites. But they believe that by eating flesh and drinking wine and sleeping with Chandri, Naranappa has lost his Brahmin hood.

Being Brahmins, they believe that they are able to take on the sins of other people. They get this power from the God because they are born as Brahmins. Because of their Brahmin hood, they have pride. Here the author satirizes by pointing that "After all we are born as Brahmins only to take on others' sin" (34). In fact, they are not able to remove their own sin, how can they take on the sin of others. They are born Brahmins but how can they take on others' sins? This thought provides enough humour to us.

There is another important character in the Brahmin colony named Shripati who flirts with Belli which is a great attack on Brahmin hood. It is the pivotal example of hypocrisy. On the one hand, they believe in an orthodox Brahmin hood and on the other hand, they particularly Shripati flirts with an orphan girl Belli. Here is the great difference between what they believe and how they behave. The description of this event and its language is satirical.

He turned his flashlight on and off and embarrassed her. Shripati wrapped on his dhoti again, put on his shirt, took out a pocket comb and combed his cropped hair and ran in hurry (Murthi: 1978, 41).

Here the word 'again' is highly satirical. It means Shripati comes to Belli again and again.

The marriage system as described here is also satirical because in those days the marriage was possible at a very young age. But nowadays there is a great change in the system of marriage. Lakshmidavamma who married at eight, widowed at ten and her father – in – law and mother – in – law had died when she was fifteen. The agrahara has sneered at her at the ill – starved girl. At a very young age, she loses all her happiness of life.

Lakshmidavamma is something different from all the other rigid Brahmins. When the Brahmins do not deal with the dead body of Naranappa, she attacks the Brahmin hood and cries:

Where has your Brahmin hood gone, you rascals! Brahminism is in ruins, why don't you shave your heads and become Muslims (Murthi : 1978, 43).

The knowledgeable Brahmins cannot understand the above thing which can be easily understood by a widow who is without knowledge. Indian superstition is also reflected through the appearance of the ghost of Naranappa. It is believed that if Naranappa's dead body doesn't get the proper rituals, he can become a tormenting ghost.

There is an important question which emerges during the whole novel again and again:

Once a Brahmin, always a Brahmin?

Naranappa's targets are the strait – laced village Brahmins who attend to the samskara (rituals) but have not earned by any means of their "refinement of spirit" (samskara). They are greedy, gluttonous and mean spirited, they love gold, betray orphans and widows, they are jealous of Naranappa's every forbidden pleasure. They turn for answer to Praneshacharya, Naranappa's opposite number.

But ironically in the very act of the seeking the answer in the holy books and later in seeking a sign from Maruti, the chaste Monkey God, the Acharya does abandon everything and becomes one with his opposite; contrary to all his preparation, he sleeps with Chandri, Naranappa's low caste mistress. After that incident, Praneshacharya feels that his fall brings him down equivalent to Naranappa. By what authority now can he judge Naranappa or advise his Brahmin followers? His sudden sexual experience with the forbidden Chandri becomes an orthodox "rite of initiation" so the question "Who is a Brahmin, how is he made?" is important to understand here. At last he begins to transform himself. He participates in the condition of his opposite Naranappa through Naranappa's own handpicked whole.

The end of the novel is also full of ambiguity. It has multiple meanings and provides a lot of curiosity to the readers. Perhaps the writer deliberately creates the open end. The novel in a way ends but does not conclude.



Despite all the virtues of Acharya, he does not have the virtue of living out fully his present stage. Having exiled “Kama” from his house and family, he has to find it outside his customary space in the forest, his sense of Dharma has to be undone and remade by it.

In the whole novel, Naranappa is a challenge to the orthodox Brahmin society and Brahmin hood. He is also a challenge to Brahmins who are hypocrite in action and life. Samskara is not the estate of the high caste Brahmins only but the act of Samskara would become the estate of Chandri and her Muslim friends who are non – Brahmins.

In short, the whole novel is full of satire which is the main theme of this novel. The aim of the novelist is to expose the follies and foibles of Indian Brahmin society in a very humorous way and no doubt, Anant Murthy has excellently done it.

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