CHAPTER – III

SAMSKARA

Fiction is not only a representation of social reality, but also a necessary functional part of social control, and also, paradoxically, an important element in social change.

-Rock Well

The advent of realism in Kannada literature, and in other regional language literatures of India as well, could be seen as one of the direct consequences of various social-reform movements that were taking place in colonial India during the nineteenth century. The issues and concerns of the social-reform movements provided the themes of most of the early Kannada novels, which were not historical or marvellous-romantic in content. This could be one of the reasons why the ‘realist’ novel in Kannada is popularly known as samajika kadambari or ‘social novel’.

Unlike in English, novel in Kannada is just over a century old. The birth and development of kannada novel can be traced in terms of several phases. The earliest attempts in the last part of the 19th century were translations from Marathi. Indirabai by Gulvadi Venkata Rao, published in 1899, is said to be the first ever novel in Kannada. Along with this, Keruru Vasudevacharya’s Indira (1908) and M.S. Puttanna’s Ma:diddunno: Maha:ra:ya (“You Eat What You Cook”, 1915) form the first phase of Kannada novel. Translations from Marathi and Bengali - especially, historical novels - continued to flourish throughout this early phase, but the main interest of this period from a historical point of view lies in the fact that the original novels were mostly of a realistic
nature and it is this bias towards realism that gave a direction to the genre in Kannada. But ‘realism’ is a loosely understood notion; in the Kannada context it was also tinged with a good degree of idealism and often social realism and romantic idealism both served the same cause of social reform. Consider thus the first novel itself: the theme here is widow-marriage. The entire narration, handled with acute realistic techniques, ultimately leads to the happy ending of marriage between the heroine, a young widow, Indira, and an educated handsome man. Widow-marriage and women’s education, besides also religious conversion (from Hinduism to Christianity), were some of the social issues that found representation in Kannada novel during this period,

The realistic tradition takes firm roots in the second phase. Beginning in the twenties it goes up to mid-sixties, often oscillating between pure realism and romantic realism. As G.S. Amur correctly notes, the twenties were when modernism came into English literature, but Kannada writers, not exposed to English literature beyond the 19th century, reflecting the educational bias of colonial India, were unaware of any such movement. They were well versed in the works of George Eliot and Charles Dickens but had not yet heard of James Joyce’s Ulysses!

_Samskara_ presents before us a community of persons who are interlocked with each other through various complex relationships- caste, economy, gender, societal hierarchy, religious questions and taboos ferment a complex web of relationships, against the backdrop of which the story line has been sketched. Superficially the novel deals with the dilemma of performing the last rites of Naranappa, a rebellious Brahmin who could not be excommunicated from his community by the rest of the Brahmins: yet at another level it also judges the quality of an entire way of life through two major characters,
Praneshacharya and Naranappa, who are presented as foil and counterfoil to each other. These characters are affected, albeit in non-identical manner, by the traditions of their milieu, help to define it, and are absolute ends in themselves.

Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara*, narrates the story of a decadent Brahmin settlement in Karnataka in pre-Independent India perhaps decade or two before Independence. Praneshacharya, the protagonist, is an honest and learned Brahmin revered by all except the anti-hero Naranappa. The Acharya is married to a cripple for many years and has been taking care of her, besides also giving religious discourses to the community and doing his priestly duties at the Hanuman temple. This he has been doing day after day without demur- in fact, with a great sense of self-fulfillment. This is because he believes that everything is pre-ordained and the scriptures have the answers to all the human problems. The aim of man is liberation from the cycle of rebirth and for him the path to liberation is righteous living. Although he knows that the Brahmins of the settlement are far off the mark, still there may be some hope for them if they follow the path. But there is one man, Naranappa, who seems to be irredeemable. A lapsed Brahmin by choice, Naranappa lives a totally free and wayward life and threatens to convert to Islam if formally ostracized. He drinks, smokes, eats meat, does everything that an orthodox Brahmin ought not to do, and he even has an outcaste woman, Chandri, for a concubine. Of the same age and lineage, Naranappa is a challenge not only to the moral integrity of the Acharya but everything that he stands for. One day he dies and Chandri comes to the Acharya with a problem: Naranappa being childless, who is to cremate his body and conduct the death ceremony? As an untouchable woman, she herself cannot do it. Will the Brahmins of the settlement do it? The dilemma is that although he revolted against
Brahminism, Naranappa is a Brahmin by birth, and therefore his body should be cremated according to Brahminic customs; but he is also an outcaste to Brahminism and therefore no Brahmin will agree to cremate his body and conduct the death ceremony. (The word ‘samskara’, originally Sanskrit, has multiple meanings in the text but death ceremony is the predominant one.)

*Samskara* is a serious novel, dealing with the traditional ritual of the cremation of the dead body of a Brahmin. In the entire novel, Anantha Murthy has made an attempt to differentiate between the appearance and reality by adopting a series of literary devices, such as symbols, myths, irony, satire and humour, among others. The basic purpose behind Anantha Murthy’s novel is his desire to show that a highly learned Brahmin, such as Praneshacharya, fails in understanding the reality of the world by adhering to the theoretical, bookish, outdated and even decadent traditions and rituals.

The novel depicts the individual journey of the central protagonist Pranesha, from the centre to the periphery and a return to that centre possibly with an altered vision about it. The women and the outcastes continue to remain on the periphery and his perceptions about them remain unaltered. Their condition does not affect him. It is a world that is on the threshold of modernity but steeped in the traditional. The Brahmin agrahara is the microcosm of modern India where the role of the secular law books exist with traditionally sanctioned laws. The secular and religious laws chart contradictory courses. Sura points out:

As a religious novel about a decaying Brahmin colony in the south Indian village of Karnataka. *Samskara* serves as an allegory rich in realistic
detail, a contemporary reworking of ancient Hindu themes and myths, and a serious, poetic study of a religious man living in a community of priests gone to seed. A death, which stands as the central event in the plot, brings in its wake a plague, many more deaths, live questions with only dead answers, moral chaos, and the rebirth of one man (Sura 4).

The novel is not just about decay nor about Brahmins, not just about a village in the grip of a plague nor about the centrality of death, not just about Hindu myths and rituals nor about the spiritual rebirth of one man. It is about all of those things together with something more fundamental, pervasive, and essentially opposite to the apparent centrality of death in the fictional plot: it is the continuity of life across a landscape haunted by death, Samskara’s message is the assertion of life and its inextinguishable presence in the midst of extinction, physical or metaphysical, individual or communal, visible or invisible, not because of but in spite of the forces of nihilism and despair.

The novel, set in the colonial era, just before India was to achieve its freedom from British rule does not reflect the emancipatory tendencies of a resurgent India. Though a critique of Brahminism was very much part of the social and political climate of the times, the lower caste characters in the novel do not seem to be aware of it. Naranappa, the modern Brahmin taunts Praneshacharya. The critique of traditional Brahminism and the caste system emerged from, both the West and from within Indian society. The colonial strategy to discredit Brahminism began, post the 1857 Mutiny. The Mutiny was largely fed by the Brahmins, and this made the British recruit the lower castes into the army. This allowed the lower castes an option out of their traditionally inferior jobs within Hindu society. Thus, the perception about the colonial rule among the
lower castes and the Brahmins vastly differed. For instance, the agrahara Brahmins view the Army as a polluting influence whereas many lower caste activists hailed the colonial enterprise as emancipatory for themselves. This reflects that there is no one given ‘tradition’ at any one given time. Traditions are ultimately ideological constructions liable to change according to changing times and people.

Thus, there exist various ‘traditions’ within Hindu philosophy. In the novel, Praneshacharya represents the Spiritualist school, while Naranappa represents the Materialist school. The other Brahmins in the agrahara and elsewhere are divided according to different sects they belong to. The Madhvas and the Smartas are the two predominant sects. The Madhvas are seen as practicing one-upmanship on the latter. The irony is that this one-lane ‘agrahara’ itself lingers on the margins in the context of urban growth around it but this does not prevent creating sub layers amidst them of marginalized groups such as the lower castes. This settlement consists of deprived, decrepit Brahmin families with subgroups as mentioned above, and each subgroup vying with “the other for achieving a hegemonic status often creates frictions among them.

Furthermore, this village is depicted as a kind of miniature polity with strict rules and any infringement of them is punishable by excommunication” (70). The novel realistically depicts their differences. Though the ideal of a unified sense of Brahminism remains elusive, the question of what constitutes Brahminism acts as a unifying principle of the narrative. Praneshacharya’s agonizing over his loss of Brahminhood reiterates this question at various levels of the text. Praneshacharya’s inability to resolve the problem and arrive at any satisfactory resolution suggests that ultimately such a quest is flawed and doomed to failure. By the end of the novel, Praneshacharya begins to comprehend the
differences and interconnectedness between all things. But he is unable to surrender his Brahminhood and accept the un-Brahminical world-view. His inability to accept the un-Brahminical as a viable alternative, limits him.

Praneshacharya and Naranappa are different characters in the novel. Naranappa had all along wanted to forge a new identity for himself, partly as a hedonist and partly as a reformer. He wanted to shake the very foundations on which the Brahmin community had based its ethos. His loathing of its corrupt ways is palpable. He tells Praneshacharya, “Your Garuda, he robs shaven widows, he plots evil with black magic men, and he is one of your Brahmins, isn’t he? . . . All right, let’s see who wins, Acharya, you or me? Let’s see how long all this Brahmin business will last” (28). Further he says, “All your Brahmin respectability, I’ll roll it up and throw it all ways for a little bit of pleasure with one female” (29). He is self-reliant and advocates a direct participation in life. He believes in imparting equal treatment to all castes. He is almost irreverent in his criticism of the upper caste practices of distancing themselves from others, “Your texts and rites don’t work anymore. The Congress Party is coming to power, you’ll have to open up the temples to all outcastes” (30). He is the only character in the novel who, against the politically turbulent background of 1930s, shows any awareness of contemporary socio-political issues. Rest of the Brahmins, including Praneshacharya, are oblivious of the possibility of any changes in their familiar world. Several people are drawn towards him as he postulates new ideas and supports their realization. He is also a helpful person and possesses sharp business acumen. He had loaned money to Ahmad Bari, the fish merchant, to buy oxen when he was bankrupt. He had donated a harmonium to the Parijata Drama Troupe and was its prime mover. He also defies the Brahminical taboos
about partaking of food prepared by lower caste people. He eats food prepared by
Chandri despite her hesitation. Chandri terms him as an “angry, mad, strong-willed man” (31) who had never bowed to the social pressures.

There are apparently two male protagonists in the novel - Naranappa, the
condemned one, and Praneshacharya, who is shown in constant conflict, agony and
dilemma in the second half of the novel, struggling internally to find his own answers to
many problems but if we analyze the causes of their predicament, it is their involvement
with Chandri, a lowcaste harlot (considered to be un-samskari—impure, unrefined,
uncultured because of her birth from a prostitute’s womb) who was brought by
Naranappa to this hamlet inhabited by the higher caste Brahmins (supposed to be
samskari—pure, refined, cultured since born in Brahmin families)—men and women.
Naranappa’s open living with Chandri had caused commotion in the entire agrahara
during his lifetime and now even after his death leaving the fellow Brahmins hungry and
angry.

The clash between Praneshacharya’s consciousness and the socio-religious
processes that follow the death of Naranappa open doors for a critique. The estrangement
of the reader from an unusual situation provides the much-needed critical distance and a
dissonant ground for social criticism. The cultural dialectic that the novel supports is one
between Naranappa and the Brahminical social mores of which Praneshacharya is the
most respectable champion in his village. Naranappa knows that his binary opposite was
Praneshacharya and he had taken upon himself to finish Praneshacharya because the
values that Praneshacharya symbolized went against him: “Let me see who wins in the
— you or me. I’ll destroy Brahminism, I certainly will. My only sorrow is that there’s no Brahminism really left to destroy in this place—except you” (53).

_Samskara_ presents a vivid picture of a society which has accepted caste discrimination as a norm. It has unquestioningly accepted the Brahmin eminence, and pushed the lower-caste people to a periphery. Brahmins are supposed to be the spiritual and temporal guides, teachers and exponents of law, whereas the Shudras perform menial services only. They are routinely denied even the semblance of equality. Their hutments are quite a distance away from the Brahmin agrahara. The abject poverty of their life is also discernible. They depend on manual labour for their livelihood. Chinni and Belli pick up the cow dung. They are treated with indifference. Chinni begs for something to eat, standing at a distance from a Brahmin woman, “Please, avva, throw a morsel for my mouth, avva” (12). Betel leaf, betel nut and tobacco are thrown at her from some distance. Such incidents highlight the extent of untouchability practised in the contemporary South Indian society. Thus we see that the caste emerges as an independent character in _Samskara_. It informs the action, moulds the characters’ responses and also provides the much-needed sociological background.

Praneshacharya is introduced to us as a learned ascetic. “Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning” (13), he is the unquestioned spiritual guru of the agrahara Brahmins. Even Naranappa grudgingly accepts that he epitomizes the traditional Brahminic virtues, His only desire is to attain salvation, and for it he is willing to undergo severe trials. In his eagerness to attain it, he jumps the traditional advice of the _Varnashrama_ system. The Indian concept of the _Varnashrama_ postulates the division of an individual’s life into four stages, i.e., dharma, artha, kama and moksha. The first is the stage of value addition and
learning the righteous path. The second stage expects one to possess material affluence. The third stage expects an individual to fulfil familial responsibilities. Only after having satisfactorily experienced the first three stages, an individual can attain *Moksha* or salvation, with its promise of irrevocable bliss.

Praneshacharya transgresses the sequential expectations of the *Varnashrama* system. He marries an invalid and deliberately deprives him not only of conjugal happiness, but also of familial pleasures. Having a family is an extremely important part of the householder stage because the other stages do not produce offspring. The begetting of offspring is needed to ensure the continuance of the rites. The importance of the male child is also stressed in the novel. Absence of a male child sometimes may result in a highly problematic situation as it does in *Samskara* after Naranappa's death.

Praneshacharya cannot be ignorant of such customs as the novel graphically delineates his familiarity with the mores of Brahminic tradition. Before taking his own meal, he places the fodder before Gowri, the cow, and worship-fully caresses its body. He touches his own eyes with the hand that had touched the holy animal in a gesture of respect. He touches the animal with affection whereas he is not ready to touch human being, Chandri. When Chandri comes to announce Naranappa’s death, he knows that he would be polluted after talking to her, and will have to bathe again before his meal. In such well-documented context he cannot conceive the Acharya’s ignorance of the *Varnashrama* system. He also painstakingly takes care of his invalid wife, Bhagirathi. It gives him pleasure to think that such action would bring his *nirvana* a bit closer. His relationship with his wife is not based on love or mutual understanding. Despite his compassionate attitude towards her, a clandestine hypocrisy can be read in his attitude towards her.
Bhagirathi on the other hand has been portrayed as a sensitive and traditional woman. She is aware of the barren nature of their marriage. She tells the Acharya, “A house needs a child to make it home. You’ve had no joy in this marriage” (15). But the Acharya feels that by marrying an invalid he gets “ripe and ready” for the ultimate salvation. Despite it, he comes across as a person of integrity and compassion, virtues which are reflected in all his deeds. He does not excommunicate Naranappa. Searching his conscience for an explanation of such decision, he finds answer in the infinite compassion of his heart, “was it only his threat to become a Muslim and pollute the agrahara that had kept the Acharya from excommunicating him? No, there was also compassion. The infinite compassion in his heart” (16). Material wealth does not tempt him. He returns Chandri's gold to her stating that she still has a life to live.

_Samskara_ introduces various female characters to us. However, the only woman character which has been developed fully is that of Chandri. She can be termed as a round character. E.M. Forster has remarked that “the test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising the readers in a convincing way. A round character must have the incalculability of life within the pages of a book” (Forster 69). Chandri possesses the profundities and complexities of the human mind, and develops with changing circumstances. Her portrayal also indicates her readiness for an “extended life.”

Chandri is introduced to us right in the beginning of the novel as Naranappa’s concubine and a lowborn prostitute. Praneshacharya is aware that he would be polluted after talking to her. She is shunned by the Brahmins of the agrahara, even though Naranappa always treated her with a sense of equality, even eating the food cooked by her. Chandri does not possess any cultural talent. Rather, she has ungrudgingly accepted
her secondary social status and learnt to act accordingly. When she goes to
Praneshacharya to inform him about Naranappa’s death, she stands meekly in the yard.
She also requests Naranappa not to eat food cooked by her. While the Brahmins gather to
discuss the matter of Naranappa’s rites, she remains on the periphery, sitting against a
pillar. Her spontaneous decision to offer her gold for the expenses of the rites startles
everyone. “Suddenly Chandri did something that stunned the Brahmins. She moved
forward to stand in the front courtyard. . . Loosened her four-strand gold chain, her thick
bracelet, her bangles, and placed them all in a heap before Praneshacharya. She mumbled
something about all this jewellery being there for the expenses of the rite, and went back
to stand in her place” (25).

Chandri also possesses an acute practical sharpness. Unable to leave Naranappa’s
body rotting in his house, she tries to arrange his cremation. When Sheshappa indicates
his inability to meddle with a Brahmin corpse, she seeks the help of a Muslim
acquaintance. Without bothering for religious rituals, she carries the corpse to the
cremation ground and burns it, as she feels that it was only a carcass, a “stinking, rotten
carcass” (26), neither Brahmin, nor Shudra. She is also unwilling to create any com-
plexities in Praneshacharya’s life, and leaves the agrahara clandestinely. Her self-image
is “matrilineal and she displays strong affections for her mother” (Nalini 160) She desires
a child by Praneshacharya as he had looks and also virtue. She is “a natural in pleasure,
unaccustomed to self-reproach” (27). She does not want to publicize what had brought a
sense of “worthwhileness” to her. Suppressing her desire to meet the Acharya again, she
quietly moves away, taking her jewellery and saris with her.
Caste, social status and profession wise Chandri is a whore, an outcaste and is dubbed as “Mari” (the dark goddess of death, plague etc.,) by Garudacharya, “a seducing witch,” “a filthy whore” (32) whose face should be branded, by Anasuya, Lakshmana’s wife who blamed that Chandri had ruined her cousin’s married life and was mainly interested in the property and gold of Naranappa, her own maternal uncle’s son whose corpse was lying “around like this without even the benefit of a rite” only because of her having distracted him from the path of righteousness. The gold she has been wearing around her neck and wrists should have adorned her sister’s body if she were alive—Naranappa’s lawful wife—now dead. These comments of the samskari men and women place Chandri in her defined caste and social order because of which she has to bear their wrath and venom but if we analyze her role, conduct, intentions, attitudes, actions and impressions on a few characters in the novel step by step, these reveal her to be a grateful, kind, compassionate, humane, refined, cultured woman, in other words a samskari human being as compared to the male and female Brahmin characters in the novel, who boast of their high birth and samskars.

Being a harlot by class and caste, she is the ‘other’ among the community of upper caste Brahmins and hence holds a marginalized status but Naranappa never ill-treated her. He rather defended his living with her and deserting his wife as who would live with a woman who can’t give you pleasure. He declared his relations with her justified in the light of such relations of their sages mentioned in the Puranas and other holy texts from which Praneshacharya himself illuminated and explicated the passages describing the beauty of the female body which had made many a sages like Parashara, Vishvamitra, Shankara have illicit sexual union in whom the fellow Brahmins took much
pride clamouring themselves to be their proud descendents. Though Durgabhattachya too
(from the Smarta Brahmin sect considered somewhat lower to Madhva Brahmin caste)
approved of Naranappa-Chandri relationship in this light but it was not to favour Chandri
but only to, check and measure “the rival sect’s orthodoxy with a questioning eye” (33)
whose many members visited the prostitutes quite often. He himself felt jealous of
Naranappa for possessing such a beauty resembling the figure of Matsyagandhi, “the
Fisherwoman in the Ravi Varma print hung up” in his bedroom “shyly trying to hide her
breasts bursting through her poor rag of a sari” (34), the foul smelling fisherwoman
whose body had become perfumed after her physical union with the sage Parashara.

Durgabhattachya, like many other middle-aged and young Brahmins of this and other
agraharas, secretly desired Chandri and he even ogled at her when after Naranappa's
death she was standing in a corner, aloof and isolated with her head covered and who
seldom moved out of the house when Naranappa was alive.

Chandri used to be beautifully clad and adorned her hair with the blooming
fragrant flowers of the night queen grown in their backyard whereas the wives of other
Brahmins wore the withered flowers collected from the temple altar. She dissuaded
Naranappa from eating the food cooked by her, eating fish and meat which she could
have in the house of Muslims whenever she liked as it was not allowed in his dharma but
Naranappa did not bother about these prohibitions, called these “sheer pigheadedness”
and shared his food and joy with her. Both of them provided emotional support to each
other. Instead of abiding by his discourteous commands in his drunken state to bring
liquor for Praneshacharya who had come to advise him in certain matters, she was
respectful towards the Acharya and advised Naranappa not to behave improperly.
Thus though Chandri’s relationship with Naranappa was not socially approved yet both of them lived happily for ten years as if made for each other. She neither demanded anything from Naranappa nor did she meddle with his other affairs or tried to transgress her caste limits as she was aware of his and her own caste status but she lived and behaved like a cultured woman. The only regret she had from this relationship was that in spite of her staying with Naranappa for ten long years “she still hadn’t had a child” and regretted “She had got everything, yet had nothing.” She used to think: “If she had borne a son, he could have become a great musician; if a daughter, she could have taught her to dance, classical style” (35). But she was conscious of the fate and plight of the women of her class “ever auspicious, daily-wedded, the one without widowhood” (36). Her desire to be a mother is every woman’s natural desire and what is more important is her progressive thinking of educating her children without any discrimination. These were her feelings, thoughts, dreams and desires in relation to Naranappa. Hence though not a legally wedded wife from an upper caste, she is not a money minting prostitute as declared by the Brahmin women in the agrahara but a sincere human being who alone along with Praneshacharya is grieved over the demise of Naranappa: “Not a human soul there felt a pang at Naranappa’s death, not even women and children” (37). Whereas other samskari Brahmins are unwilling to perform Naranappa’s samskar because of many religious and personal reasons based on property disputes, it is only Chandri who is anxious and worried about the plague-hit corpse of Naranappa and wants it to be cremated as per the proper rites to help Naranappa’s salvation. “If Naranappa’s body didn’t get the proper rituals, he could become a tormenting ghost. She had enjoyed life with him for ten years. How could she rest till he got a proper funeral?” (38). “If they
didn’t give him a death-rite according to the books, he’ll surely become an evil spirit” (39).

When the question of meeting the expenses of the funeral obsequies—*Samskara*—is raised, it is Chandri who comes forward, removes all her gold and offers it to Praneshacharya to meet the total expenses for the proper rites of the man who had given her all the comforts and joys. Instead of appreciating her act of offering her gold, the staring at the heap of gold worth two thousand rupees and the quarrel of Durgabhatta and Lakshmana and their wives, Sitadevi and Anasuya (mythical names ironically used) over the possession of this gold (who had earlier warned their husbands, whispering into their ears not to agree in a hurry to perform the rites as the guru will excommunicate them) and now their persuading of their husbands individually to claim before Praneshacharya their rights to cremate the dead body of Naranappa so that Chandri’s gold could come to them exposes the hypocrisy, greed, hatred, selfishness and jealousies of these samskari Brahmins who are expected to be above these base feelings, projects Chandri as a samskari human being.

It is interesting to observe that now instead of blaming Chandri for Naranappa’s pollution, they start accusing each other for their nefarious practices and intentions with regard to Naranappa. “Praneshacharya grew anxious. Why did Chandri spoil everything with her good intentions?” (40). Her act of “compassion—the human gold— which Chandri evinced by offering her ornaments was not found either in the Acharya or in his Brahmin society. Chandri’s offer of gold was an act of faith in man which the agrahara could not project in a crisis. Her gold only exposed the vacuity of the order” (Sundari 68). Praneshacharya is moved by this act of her, appreciates it before his invalid wife,
Bhagirathi, “how pure Chandri’s heart was, how she laid down all her gold and what new complications arose from that generous act” (41). When the night falls he asks Chandri to take rest in the dining-room of his house, gives her a mat, a pillow and a blanket to sleep comfortably and also returns her gold saying, “Naranappa is dead. But you’ve your life to live” (42). It is Praneshacharya alone who is compassionate towards her in her distress and she also finds only in him the support after Naranappa.

Another act of Chandri which projects her as a better human being vis-a-vis the Brahmin community of Durvasapura is her following the Acharya, to avoid the anger of Brahmins, when not finding answer to Naranappa’s cremation in the Books of Law he had gone to the Maruti temple to seek the answer for this dilemma so that the Brahmins could cremate the dead body and take food. She carries plantains in the corner of her sari, waits for him under a tree. She is full of pity and compassion for this man who is suffering for others. She remembers the words of her mother who used to say, “prostitutes should get pregnant by such holy men” and realizes, “Such a man was Acharya, he had such virtues; he glowed. But one had to be lucky to be blessed by such people” (43), though she has no intention of entrapping him. On Acharya’s coming back from the temple without finding any answer, she follows him in the darkness, falls at his feet for seeking his blessings, and while lifting her up he feels the warmth of her body and full breasts. Chandri holds him down, gives him the plantains to eat and caresses him. This tender love leads them to have sexual union. When Acharya wakes up in the midnight: “His head was in Chandri’s lap. His cheek was pressed into her low naked belly. Chandri’s fingers caressed his back, his ears, his head” (44). He feels himself fallen but does not “scold” or “despise” her for this. Rather he tells her that now he had lost the
authority to decide for the agrahara. He asks her that this act must be confessed before the agrahara gathering and they must tell “this happened.” “If I don’t have the courage to speak, tomorrow you must speak out. I’m ready to do the funeral rites myself. I’ve no authority to tell any other Brahmin to do them, that’s all” (45). She lets him go ahead and reaching the agrahara goes to the room where Naranappa’s rotting, stinking body is lying and considers it her duty to cremate it.

Gathering courage, she goes alone in the night to the cart-man Sheshappa’s house and on his refusal to meddle with “a Brahmin corpse” she seeks the help of a Muslim fish merchant Ahmad Bari (an outcaste), a friend of Naranappa whom he had helped with a small loan to buy oxen when he was bankrupt, to cremate the dead body in the dark of night with the firewood lying in her house (nobody knows about this fact and the samskari Brahmins including Praneshacharya keep on wriggling over the ritual sanctities foolishly). Through this third humane act, she breaks the tradition and caste barriers like Naranappa and “gets the better of Praneshacharya: she takes the burden off the Brahmin’s hands, but exposes the inhumanity of orthodox Brahminism that permitted itself to be trapped in ritual hairsplitting when faced with life-and-death issues” (Parthasarthy 195-96). After cremation, she weeps to her heart’s desire for Naranappa, collects her clothes, money and gold and leaves in the dark to travel by road to catch a bus in the morning for Kundapura without even informing Praneshacharya about the cremation and her intention to depart. Instead of taking advantage of the situation to blackmail Praneshacharya and see Praneshacharya’s humiliation in front of others if he spoke about the last night’s act, her decision to leave the place quietly speaks of her good samskars as compared to those of Praneshacharya’s samskari fellow Brahmins who would have left no stone unturned to
downgrade him on knowing his inadvertent act. Her decision of not meeting him before leaving as it would make such a noble man feel small before her, too is an indicator of her greatness as a human being and regard for the genuine goodness of the Acharya and his kindness towards her throughout. Thus we see that Chandri’s belonging to a lower caste in no way makes her a base and lower human being. Rather she possesses the basic human quality “Compassion, the right way of dharma, being human Brahmin-hood” (Sundari 48). has very appropriately summed up her qualities, how samskarta, refined and cultured she is:

She has a conscience that is lovable. At least, she is not thankless, she wants the funeral rites to be performed for the separated man, with whom she had spent a good many intimate moments. The money paid or the ornaments gifted, do not compensate the feelings, however fake or rehearsed. She is the only person who demonstrates man’s love for man. She does not pack up or go to her village (Kundapura) the moment Naranappa dies. Rather she offers all her gold for the Samskara of her man. She is another Antigone running towards uncertainties for certain basic values She goes back as she came, somewhat mellower perhaps, but never richer. Before she goes, however, she trounces the Acharya’s pride” (Sundari 72).

Though Chandri leaves the stage at this point right in the middle of the text and we are not told of her whereabouts afterwards but the impact she leaves on the mind of Praneshacharya (he could not have the courage to tell the fellow Brahmins the truth) after exposing him to the world of flesh, which he had not explored and tasted so far because
of his choice marriage with an invalid woman which would keep him away from the lust, and his asceticism and service of her will surely guarantee him a seat in heaven, leaves him in further dilemma, conflict and turmoil which have been shown through a series of interior monologues of the Acharya in the novel. He starts realizing the duplicity in his life and feels himself “Hung—suspended under two truths like ‘Trishanku’” (48). His contact with Chandri now makes him aware of the difference between the world of beauty and ugliness and he understands the willing submission of the ancient sages of the Hindu mythology and that of his studious ashram friend Mahabala and of Naranappa to the female beauty. He also finds Naranappa having a victory over him who had earlier challenged him. Chandri, thus is present with Praneshacharya even through her absence. His strenuous struggle with himself while passing through the world of real life experiences in the company of Putta in their beauty, ugliness and ruthlessness, resolving to own the responsibility of his action boldly and his reaching the decision of living with Chandri openly like Naranappa as this way he will “remake” himself as a human being show him now a reborn person “a trija, thrice born,” have been pictured very incisively which may be called the dilemma of everyman of Praneshacharya’s kind of mental makeup and social status in the given socio-cultural milieu. “The shift of ethics from the socialistic and religious to existentialism is quite prominent from this stage” (Bhat 7).

As compared to the jealous and greedy wives of the Brahmins and other women of lowcaste it is Chandri who stands apart for her praiseworthy traits which undoubtedly make her a samskari woman in spite of her belonging to a low caste. Thus we see that being a subaltern in that social set up though she cannot speak openly and assert her opinion of right and wrong but she speaks through her good-intentioned acts which cross
the boundary of caste-laid norms. Through her humane acts Anantha Murthy as “a critical insider” not only lays bare the hypocrisy and shams of the decadent Brahminic order but by making Praneshacharya ultimately decide to confess his act fearlessly before the Brahmins, cremate the dead body of Naranappa himself (What an irony of human perception!), go to Kundapura, start living with Chandri openly, he also floats his reformative vision of the rehabilitation of the prostitutes like Chandri who are the product and victims of the patriarchal and rigid caste system. If the learned religious men take lead in this connection, the victimization of the women of this class will surely end. Moreover, the offspring born out of the union of such a noble and educated man and such a cultured woman will surely write a bright future for any cultural set-up. The reference to the sage Parashara, the great ascetic from whose sexual union with a fish wife was born Vyasa, the seer, the compiler of the Vedas and the epic poet of the Mahabharata, is suggestive of such a birth from the womb of Chandri as she has carried the seed of Praneshacharya. But whether Praneshacharya will have the courage to go to Kundapura by breaking the tight shackles of the Samskaras of his caste, own Chandri and her child socially and legally or will he just keep her as a keep like Naranappa or Mahabala is a question mark because in the end of the narrative he is shown still grappling with himself: “How can I face all those Brahmins alone?” (49). The “anxious, expectant” Praneshacharya sits in the lorry going to Durvasapura and the narrative itself ends with a question mark: “He will travel, for another four or five hours. Then, after that, what?” (50). Thus we find that “while narrating this tale, the author raises several questions and highlights various conflicts and contrasts in society, but it ends without offering any specific solution” (51).
The narrative which contains so many questions one after the other, through the portrayal of the samskars of Chandri’s intentions, conduct and acts poses many other pertinent questions also before the orthodox caste-based patriarchal system. Who is responsible for the making of prostitutes? Is being born in a family of prostitutes a girl’s fault? Does a prostitute’s daughter have no right to lead a respectable married life? Should a prostitute’s daughter also become a prostitute? Is the formation of prostitutes their own choice or is it a part of the plan of Destiny or the creation of patriarchal system or the result of the failure of the institution of marriage which the bard in William Blake’s poem “London” refers to?

How the youthful harlot’s curse

Blasts the newborn infant’s tear,

And blights with plagues the marriage hearse (Blake 36).

Is once a Brahmin always a Brahmin? The social and religious orders need to find answers to these and many more such questions and redefine their values of purity and impurity to put an end to the institution of prostitution and rehabilitate the women of this class with dignity. But to the two questions (i) who is a true samskari”? (ii) does your birth or caste determine your Samskaras or your humane attitudes and actions? there cannot be two answers.

In the novel it is not as much he as Chandri who is blamed for having spoilt him and defiled the entire Madhva community. The destruction of Samskaras is therefore blamed on the corrupt lower castes and the ignorant subalterns. The sweep of the novel is
such that the entire moral degradation is pinned on those who are placed lower down in
the caste hierarchy. The point that is missed is that the purest of the pure Brahmins
themselves invite trouble for themselves because they tried to practise ideals that were no
longer sustainable, partially because they were based on unscientific thought and partly
because they are too difficult to practice in a world where existence itself was becoming a
problem. In the novel we see the Brahmins as having lofty ideals but in practice they
suffer from all human weaknesses and failings. Contact with the lower classes exposes
the inhumanity that underlies religion where the quintessence of humanism is overruled
by taboos and dogmas. It is not so much the fall of high caste Brahmins from the
expectations that their religion has from them but their failure to observe basic human
obligations like disposing off a rotting dead body that is shocking. And their reading and
understanding of religion prevents them from performing their duties towards a man they
had not only known themselves but had been connected to through their ancestors. They
eye the gold that his low-born mistress was willing to part with to pay for the funeral
expenses and to what the majority’s appetite for rituals. Gold in whosoever’s hands it
may go remains unpolluted for them but the owner’s dead body is unworthy of even
being disposed off.

The women calculated swiftly: heaps of gold was worth at least two
thousand rupees. One after another, the wives scanned their husbands’
faces. The Brahmins bowed their heads: they were afraid, fearful that the
lust for gold might destroy Brahmin purity. But in the mind of every one
of them flashed the question: if some other Brahmin should perform the
final rite for Naranappa, he might lose his Brahminhood and yet put all the
gold on his wife’s neck (52).

The bait is tempting but never recognized as a bait and therefore efforts are made
to secure the gold without being caught on the wrong foot. The act of participating in the
cremation they think would ruin their purity and lead to damnation. But the property that
Naranappa owned and lived in becomes a matter of dispute among the Brahmins; religion
cannot stop them from acting clever. This shows that the character of the Brahmins was
flawed, and duplicitous largely due to their religious beliefs. Religion ironically instead
of uplifting them spiritually and morally contributes and abets in their dehumanization.

The women characters have been victimized by patriarchy to such an extent that
they speak the language of patriarchy and do not even spare their own subaltern sisters. If
the subaltern women are seen in poor light it is because the entire society, men, women
and children, connive against them. Therefore, both Chandri and Belli resort to a politics
of survival in which their sexuality is perhaps their finest weapon. They share the beliefs
of the Madhva community because they have been raised in a manner that stamps out
assertion against the Brahmins and yet are the ones who pose the most serious threat to
Brahminism by merely coming into intimate contact with the supposedly pious and noble
males. The lower caste subaltern women, Chandri and Belli, use the men folk under the
spell of their sexuality against the higher caste women to save themselves from any
additional burden of the working of social authority on them. These subaltern women
succeed in the novel in destabilizing the Madhva society which is biased against them,
their original sin being birth in the lower rungs of the caste-ridden social ladder. Chandri
and Belli are sexually exploited and while they allow their sexual exploitation, it is not
permitted to happen without their exploiting the males to their advantage. The sexual equations that are formed are intriguing and masculinity is made to work against itself to benefit the subalterns. In this psychic and sexual battle of low born women, it is the high born males who are emotionally traumatized and led to searching existential questions that shake their roots—the traditions and myths that sustain them are put to test as much as the people themselves. The question that one might well ask is: if subaltern women have been using their sexuality to subvert the caste ridden social system, how is it that it continues to function even till this day, and how does it fight back?

One could say that these subaltern women who strive against their exploitation share the same value system in which their arch enemies the Madhva Brahmins are advantageously placed. They subscribe to the same kind of myths that place the Brahmins at a high pedestal and the lower castes down below. The doctrines of dharma and karma go against the subalterns and yet they do not challenge them. The subalterns, due to lack of education and centuries of serfdom, have been deprived of the ability to challenge the beliefs on a rational and intellectual plane. Their threat to the system of beliefs is expediential and not systematic. Chandri resorts to her extreme decision of inviting the Muslims to cremate Naranappa when she sees the body of her beloved getting decomposed in the hut. The Brahmins do not listen to her and Praneshacharya does not have the gumption to go against whatever his caste ridden fidgety conscience and fellow Brahmins have to say. She does not hang on in the agrahara but disappears without leaving a clue about her whereabouts. And it is not without an acute sense of guilt that she has the cremation performed. Her disappearance and Praneshacharya’s being left in the lurch in a state of expectancy gives strength to those who are not guided by any
higher principles. The caste system, as one sees it in the novel, has always received jolts and then returned to its former position, has survived.

In the novel, the foremost question for the caste-ridden reader becomes one of preserving his own centuries old values—one of saving his own hardened self—sanctified by the wisdom of the great sages and lawgivers. The point that deserves to be noted is that in the conflict the lower classes get marginalized, specially the women and deserve to be foregrounded. The critic is also shaped by the society that he seeks to criticize and his criticism that is supposed to be impartial actually can be located within the society's preferences that he tries to differ with and can be predicated on a situation that he tries to escape. Being a part and product of the society he seeks to critique makes him vulnerable and suspect because to claim freedom from class interests and caste moorings is one thing and to attain it is another. It is this paradox that makes the subaltern position within the novel tricky and troublesome. Even the critic who claims critical distance and the capacity to negotiate the dialectic of upper caste and lower caste can be trapped in a slippery terrain. Why should Chandri have been merely a mistress to Naranappa and not his lawfully wedded wife? The rhetorical answer is that it is more caste than class. It is in the light of this fact that we can infer that for all his free thinking even the widower Naranappa is not above caste. In such an event, perhaps the safest position would be to look for fissures within the structures of the novel and the society it seeks to discuss and address. If pot anything else this should provide for a radical perspective.

The novel from the feminist point of view appears warped and as one that completely belies women’s hopes and aspirations. It even invites the temptation to
straighten male prejudices that are at work, to counter social reality that is nothing but a patriarchal construction. Nowhere in the novel do we hear of the real feelings of Chandri, Belli, Bhagirathi, or Sitadevi. Their inscapes seem to be unimportant. We do not know what they thought of the Brahmin men nor do we know whether they felt exploited even at the hands of Praneshcharyya because for all his goodness he does represent patriarchalism and parasitic Brahminism. The women, especially upper caste women, do not attack the social system based on hierarchies but try to make the most from within its confines to their advantage even though they meet with resistance, amusingly from their husbands and other male relatives. Brahmin male’s fondness for the subaltern women is basically sexual gratification and a cruel weakness which involves helplessness, exploitation and pain for the hapless females. Crimes against subaltern women go unreported and are hardly considered seriously for it is they who are blamed for problems that have been inflicted on them. That a Brahmin male should have made sexually explicit gestures is not taken note of, least of all condemned, and the shame lies not so much in the vulgarity of such gestures but in the fear of being polluted. If Samskara is a testimony to the prevailing social reality and has something to do with social change, which it has, then, it pushes women into the well of patriarchal mess—situations that have no real answers (within the novel) to their problems. If the answers must come from women, then, the novel by providing them little space, does not help very much. If we consider the novel as being a part and product of the social set-up, then it is a victim of the prevailing social evils and does not provide impetus to those looking for progressive answers. Those who are trapped inside the villages and agraharas of India are hardly given the opportunity to become aware of their plight, this perhaps is more so, because
the ostensible focus of the novel is Praneshacharya’s consciousness that is reinforced by the powerful and recurrent use of socially sanctified myths.

_Samskara_ is about Brahmins and the subalterns struggling in the ebb and flow of social change that transition towards modernity has brought about. It is about this transitory phase in the life of the agrahara that Anantha Murthy tries to capture the pangs of spiritual evolution and the severe emotional and spiritual crisis. The clashes between people as also values is autocriticism that the village society indulges in and it is this that disturbs their peace. The Brahmin world is the world of the petty bourgeoisie of the 1930s trying to adapt itself, with an eye on the past and the hoary traditions that sustained them, to the changing social structures. Therefore, to expect that the subalterns, especially women among them, would find the space that they deserve is to belie one’s expectations and it becomes incumbent on the critics to raise the issue—discover wherever they are absent or present as an under text in the textual palimpsest. It becomes necessary to place the women and subalterns within the petty bourgeoisie male tradition and locate how they accept and disrupt it, simultaneously, thereby creating a dialectic that must go on—read the silences and the meanings that surround them. In the polyphony of the text the muffled voices cannot be allowed to be lost. For the senile and half-wit Lakshmidevamma is insignificant in the larger scheme of things. She is ignored and bypassed by all the learned Brahmins and yet it is she who comes out with the sanest advice for the entire lot. Lakshmidevamma abuses profusely, specially Garuda for having stolen “a poor old shaven widow’s money” (54), and as she belches she utters just the right words by way of counsel and indictment:
Where has your Brahminism gone, you rascals! Don’t you know you’ll fall into the lowest hell reserved for outcastes and perish there? In this agrahara, in all my born days, have I have seen a body kept uncremated all night? Not once. Rama, Rama, the times are rotten, rotten. Brahminism is in ruins. Why don’t you shave your heads and become Muslims, why do you need to be Brahmins, you! (55).

Throughout we find that the subalterns are subordinated by history and possess no organized position to make their ideas effective. Therefore, their marginalization in Samskara is in keeping with the historical biases against them. What Gramsci had to say about their lack of a collective identity is true for our purposes because the subalterns fail to rally behind Chandri or others whenever they are pitted against the Brahmins. The precondition for strength is their being unified or attaining a collective dominant position which the Brahmins would not allow. The fever of Brahminism loosened by Naranappa’s death imposes itself on the subalterns and the ‘temperature curves’ of the high born lower only when they have castigated the subalterns with full throated ease. Naranappa’s funeral causes a rupture between the past and the present, helps refigure their wisdom in the middle of plague. The dissent, embodied by the presence of the Muslims, with received thought becomes an attempt to question the tyranny of sacrosanct and arbitrary Brahmin thought. The lower caste or subalterns are treated like juveniles that require constant surveillance and attendance by the Brahmins. Chandri’s initiative in Naranappa’s cremation is important because it is an enabling step for other subalterns—it is revolutionary because it points towards contesting the Brahmins.
One almost suspects if God was a Brahmin exploiter that he should have created religion in such a way. Even the discursive power of the text seems to work against them and abet in the incorporation of the subaltern in the Brahmin economy. The Brahmin and the subaltern communities are segregated but crossing of borders does take place between them and whenever it happens the subalterns are exploited. Attempts are made to absorb the subalterns within the Brahmin economy by reducing them to servitude and by grabbing their meager possessions. One does not know whether it is a strength or weakness of the novel that nowhere in it takes place a discursive deconstruction of the Brahmins at the hands of the subalterns, they simply accept their fate. The subalterns never attack the Brahmins verbally or by use of force. The novel connives in the stereotypical subjectification of the women and subalterns, Chandri being an exception because her decision about the funeral symbolizes the subaltern’s latent capacity for activist ingenuity. Their fragmented identities are taken advantage of by Hinduism’s patriarchs against whom Chandri unwittingly plays the role of a subversive agency. On the whole the subalterns do not have any say in decision making and the fetishized Brahminism reigns under threat. The novel does not provide space enough to conceptualize any alternate form of sociality. Putta by harping on his father being a Brahmin tries to foist an alternate genealogy in terms of the Hindu logic and thinking. Therefore, within Samskara the subalterns appear as a broken people, partially because of their lack of any homogeneity, for there are categories and divisions among the subalterns also.

The novelist writes about the heartlessness of the Brahmins—men and women—who did not feel any pain in the death of Naranappa. Instead, what worried them was an
unknown fear that Naranappa might create a problem, even in his death and, consequently, all the Brahmins, including women and children, may not be able to have their regular meals. It is a matter of pity that the Brahmins should fall so low in their selfishness as to worry about their meals while the dead body, lying for cremation, requires their urgent attention. Anantha Murthy writes of many sins that the Brahmins of agrahara committed, including those of gluttony, of avarice and love of gold. What covered them all was the “terrific virtue” of Praneshacharya but that only encouraged them to commit more sins. They show their greed for gold on the occasion of cremation of Naranappa’s body. Initially opposed to it, some of them change their views the moment Chandri, the mistress of Naranappa, comes to Praneshacharya, requesting him for a decent cremation of Naranappa, and offers her gold ornaments for it. Durgabhatta eyes Chandri greedily, thinking of her as a “precious object,” having sharpness in her features as described in Vatsyayana’s book of love. He looked at her breasts and thought:

In sex, she’s the type who sucks the male dry. Her eyes, which should be fickle, are now misty with grief and fear, but she looks good that way.

Like Matsyagandhi, the Fisherwoman in the Ravi Verma print hung up in Durgabhatta’s bedroom, shyly trying to hide her breasts bursting through her poor rag of a sari. The same eyes and nose: no wonder Naranappa threw away the worship-stone for her, ate taboo meat and drank taboo liquor (57).

Durgabhatta might have quoted some lines from romantic poetry to the Brahmins present there whose life he had found quite uninteresting and barren. A young Brahmin Shripati, after taking some liquor, sings of the beauty of Chandri, saying, “Whatever
anybody may say. Whatever Brahmins bray—swear—what do you say?—in a hundred-mile radius is there any woman as lovely, as bright, as good, as Chandri? Take a count. If you find one, I’ll give up my caste” (58). Other Brahmins like Manjunatha also take drinks though aware of the fact that the dead body of Naranappa lies uncremated there. After taking the second bottle of liquor, Shripati says, “Our best friend is lying there dead, rotting! No one to take care of his rites. And what are we doing here, having a good time”? (59).

Anantha Murthy exaggerates some traits, some habits and even some weaknesses of Garudacharya, but through him, he is broadly hinting at the problems of most of Brahmins. Garuda and Lakshmana had been related to Naranappa. Praneshacharya recollects the words of Naranappa who had forewarned him, even challenged him, about the degeneration of Brahmins, and had particularly made fun of Brahminism of Garuda, among others.

Born to a family of prostitutes, she was an exception to all rules. She was ever-auspicious, daily-wedded, the one without widowhood. How can sin define a running river? It’s good for a drink when a man’s thirsty, it’s good for a wash when a man’s filthy, and it’s good for bathing the god’s images with; it says Yes to everything, never a No. Like her, doesn’t dry up, doesn’t tire. Tunga, river that doesn’t dry, doesn’t tire (63).

Sexuality in woman is a dangerous attribute which puts caste status at risk. While the Brahmins sit in the inner courtyard, their wives are hidden from view. They listen to their husbands’ words, and hear of other women being spoken of in relation to male
Brahmin licence - both ancient and contemporary. “They hear of the ancestors’ cohabitations with Dravidian women” (65); Sankara’s dalliance with the queen; the modern brothels of Basrur, and the impure cooking of Chandri. Conscious of their difference from lower-caste women, they direct their anger at Chandri. Other fallen Brahmin women are also discussed by the men. They are often referred to by the Brahmins as causing the impurity of this or that village. A subcaste’s lines are considered mixed if any disrepute attaches to its women. A group is valued more ritually if it executes the bodily repressions on its women. The ritually lower groups are those whose widows do not cut their hair, or do not obey diet restrictions. While the responsibility of women for the ‘identity’ of the agrahara is stressed, it is clear that the old rules no longer apply where men are concerned. While women are constantly blamed in conversation, no such clarity exists in the case of Naranappa.’... ‘he may have rejected Brahminhood, but Brahminhood never left him. No one ever excommunicated him officially’ (66).

In Samskara women are made to carry the allegorical burden while the male protagonist is invested with subjectivity and agency. Praneshacharya’s invalid wife epitomizes the diseased sterility of the entire agrahara. The life principle embodied in women has dried up in the rigidity of the orthodox community, while outside this enclosed world there is a celebration of life made more desirable by contrast. Sripati’s wife would tighten and twine up her thighs when he approached her, but there was always Belli in the outcaste hutsments: ‘her body ... the colour of the earth, fertile, ready for seed, warmed by an early sun’ (80). The sensuousness of the women outside the agrahara is raised to a symbolic level by repeated mythic references to Urvashi, Menaka and Matsagandhi. The apsaras stand outside social and ethical parameters and embody in
them the feminine essence unfettered by familial relationships. Thus the withered Bhagirathi and the luscious Chandri are both symbolic figures in the dream landscape of Praneshacharya’s journey.

_Samskara_ also highlights the superstitious attitudes against women, perpetuated by social customs. Praneshacharya cannot shift his wife when the rest of the Brahmins decide to send away their families to their in-laws, as she had started her period. Abhorrence for impurities, conventionally associated with the bodily functions of women, is a belief cherished in all patriarchal set-ups, which systematically nurtures a consciousness of their secondary status among women. Praneshacharya, seeped into the values of traditional Brahminic culture, unquestioningly accepts such values. Disturbed by the eerie silence of the agrahara and the pervading stench, he had taken refuge in the forest which was still resonant with the memories of Chandri. Towards the evening when he returns to the agrahara, he finds that his invalid wife is flushed with fever. He hesitates before checking her temperature, “How can I touch a woman polluted by her menstrual blood” (21). Nalini Natrarajan in her notes has commented on the untouchability of women during their menstrual cycle. Remembering the stories from scriptures Praneshacharya used to narrate, Shripati vividly remembers a description, “Like the thighs of a blossoming woman, pure after her monthly baths” (22). Tradition encourages men to treat women only as sex objects.

In stark contrast to the shrivelled sensuality of the Brahmin women, _Samskara_ portrays women like Chandri and Belli, who belong to lower castes and almost flaunt their exuberant sexuality. They have been depicted as possessing a vigorous sensuality and prefer a direct participation in life. The relaxed constrictions about their movements
are related with the norms of their caste. They are depicted as temptresses, the text suggests that the Brahmin men cannot escape their lure. In another perspective it can be suggested that the lower-caste women are treated merely as sex objects. Within the framework of Indian caste system, feminine problems cannot be comprehensively represented. It is sometimes perceived that the freedom of movement traditionally extended to the lower caste women is synonymous with autonomous self-hood. Such generalization ignores the socio-cultural realities became such women cannot choose to be otherwise. Their relatively free movements and compulsions of physical labour do not liberate them; they only indicate their economic, class and gender oppression. The absence of sexual taboos in their life does not constitute a choice, it only facilitates their exploitation by the upper caste male. In Samskara too, the socio-economic reasons of their victimization are glossed over and the Brahmin men’s transgression to satisfy their casual carnal desires are accepted as norms. Samskara repeatedly refers to the folklore: ancestors cohabiting with Dravidian women, the legend of the Matsyagandha, people visiting the brothels of Basrur in South Kanara, the story of the Shakuntalam. Returning from Shrinali, Shripati pleasantly anticipates his rendezvous with Belli. Naranappa mockingly tells Praneshacharya, “who in the world can live with a girl who gives no pleasure—except of course some barren Brahmins” (23). Praneshacharya longingly hankers for Chandri’s presence, “He had not so far desired any of the beauty he’d read about in the classics . . . Now he wanted for himself a share of all that” (24). Such descriptions augment the fact that gendered identities are a consequence of one’s initiation into a particular culture, and its mores of defining social relationships.
The captivating seductive enticement of woman has always lured the ascetic saints in Hindu mythology. *Samskara* is also replete with such references. Anantha Murthy repeatedly alludes to the folklores of *Matsyagandha*, Sage Vishvamitra and the temptress Menaka, Shakuntala and Sage Vyasa. Such parallels in a way highlight the necessity of leading a balanced life, of enjoying all aspects of life. Sidetracking the sensual in one's personality does not allow one to burgeon fully; Praneshacharya also realizes it. He abdicates the moral right of choosing the right course of action for the agrahara Brahmans, and decides to admit his involvement with Chandri before other Brahmans:

Chandri, get up. Let’s go. Tomorrow morning when the Brahmans gather, we’ll say this happened. You tell them yourself. As for my authority to decide for the agrahara, I have . . . lost it. If I don’t have the courage to speak tomorrow you must speak out. I’m ready to do the funeral rites myself. I’ve no authority to tell any other Brahmin to do them, that’s all (17).

The episode of Praneshacharya and Chandri illustrates the truth of the assertion made by Claude Levi-Strauss in his article “Incest and Myth” that the “incest prohibition is the basis of human society, in a sense it is the society” (Levi-strauss 546). Society made it necessary to establish a systematic nature of each kinship terminology and its corresponding set of marriage rules. It also evolved a coercive character for such rules and any violation of it was looked down upon. Calculus of the caste intensified such notions within the Indian social milieu. Simultaneously, the connections with the Oedipus legend are also well established in the relationship between Praneshacharya and Chandri:
“the very precautions taken to avoid incest in fact make it inevitable ... a sensational turn of events arises from the fact that two characters, originally introduced as distinct, are identified with each other” (18).

Praneshacharya is attracted towards Chandri’s pliable erotic magnetism. His union with Chandri is the turning point of the novel, as henceforth he will not have the protection of his caste traditions, and shall be forced to face the existentialist dilemma of forging his own values and meanings in a kaleidoscopically changed world. He cannot claim obedience to any pre-existing and determining convention and has to confront the angst of the responsibility of making a choice. Praneshacharya decides to search for a meaningful after-life and decides to undertake a journey, rather an aimless wandering, in the hope of finding a release or a working-out of tensions in this personal-social problem. “The experience of isolation and self-exile is an important part of the contemporary structure of feeling, and often used effectively within the framework of a realist novel” (Raymond 586). Praneshacharya too decides to venture out into an unpredictable world—its isolating atmosphere has its own logic and may help him to get a better grip on the meanings of his life.

The characteristic experience of our century is that of asserting and preserving an individuality (again like much eighteenth-century experience) as compared with the characteristic nineteenth century experience of finding a place and making a settlement. The ordinary Victorian novel ends with a man going away on his own, having extricated himself from a dominating situation, and found himself in so doing. ... In a time of great change, this kind of extrication and discovery was a necessary and valuable movement; the recorded individual histories amount to a common history. And while old
establishments linger, and new establishments of a dominating kind are continually instituted, the breakaway has continually to be made, the personal assertion given form and substance, even to the point where it threatens to become the whole content of our literature (Raymond 589).

In the entire novel, caste assumes central importance. The caste system is by common consensus the world’s longest surviving hierarchy and is based on the principles of purity and superiority, qualities that one is supposed to inherit by birth. A person becomes a member of a particular caste with his birth and dies in it. The Dalits or lowcastes are outside the caste system and their exploitation is common throughout India. They are looked down upon because of their low caste; birth in a low caste is supposed to be the result of their bad deeds or karma in previous lives. The caste system has been recognized by all sane Hindus as pernicious and deserves to be abolished, yet it flourishes due to the hold of racial purity on our minds. If caste system had been done away with, Naranappa would have been given a decent funeral and Praneshacharya would not have had as close an encounter with Chandri as he had, may not have been mentally and spiritually destabilized so as to engender a tragedy. Praneshacharya’s tragedy too is a tragedy if we analyze it from within the Hindu caste system or else he could have easily married Chandri following his wife's death and Chandri, interestingly enough, would be twice married as it happens in more open western societies. Therefore, throughout the novel, caste remains the defining feature of Samskara and its shadow continues to hang on all the characters, ever after, because the novel is open-ended. Not one character in the entire novel can think beyond caste nor can he or she, being ill equipped intellectually and emotionally, attempt to destroy it.
All men and women are the products of the caste system and its victims, though it must be conceded that some thrive on it. Caste system has survived because of the security that it sometimes provides people locked within its cocoon. Even the Brahmins who are the apex within the caste system have to suffer because of the sacrifices that they have to make and the restricting obligations that they have to fulfil. It is in order to save their caste that they compromise with their basic independence and their proclivities towards more liberal and universal human values that are out of compulsions seen from within the confines of caste. Even salvation is related to caste and the religious practices that accompany it. The purer Brahmins would not associate themselves with the lower castes for fear of damnation and eternal perdition—of being created in the lives to come as lesser forms of life.

All characters adore the Hindu faith, they think and function from within Hinduism and that which they adore becomes the author of their own woes, as the faith demands rigid adherence from its followers. Chandri has advantages too because of her low caste compared to the Brahmins who do not expect her to follow complicated, involved and involving religious guidelines that are supposed to be beyond her comprehension. Her inability to understand the nuances and depths of Hindu-Brahminical thought makes it easier for her to violate the sanctified norms. She does what Praneshacharya could not have dared to do or imagine because of his strong religious moorings: Naranappa’s cremation with the aid of Muslims. Her daring does not necessitate a reform which Praneshacharya’s decision could have. It calls for criticism from all quarters, least of all, provide food for thought on humanistic lines. Praneshacharya, throughout the novel, does not abandon his faith in his religion, its beliefs and practices
nor does he get the opportunity to approve of Chandri’s extreme action. This can be understood if we judge from within Hinduism.

_Samskara_ traces several contemporary social practices-conscious as well as unconscious-and discusses how in daily life caste becomes the basis of labour division, social discrimination and gender exploitation. The novel begins with the death of Naranappa by bubonic plague. In his life he had violated all the taboos propagated and fostered by the Brahminic culture of the agrahara. The Brahmins face the dilemma of conducting his last rites without inviting social ostracism and wait for the decision of Praneshacharya in this regard. Praneshacharya, the protagonist of the novel, is the spiritual guide of the agrahara Brahmins. Initially it is his ascetic Brahmin identity, which is introduced to the readers.

Anantha Murthy portrays how caste system has made even the Brahmins economically weak. Traditionally Brahmins depended on performing religious rituals for their livelihood. Absence of any other skill often resulted in acute poverty in a world which was shifting towards major changes in its socio-economic views and practices. _Samskara_ graphically portrays the constrictions of a caste based economic choice. Brahmins of the agrahara are poor and ill fed. Lakshmanacharya is depicted as having “sunken cheeks, yellow eyes deep in sockets, ribs protruding . . . altogether an unbalanced body” (1). Dasacharya lived “entirely on the meals that Brahmins get at death-rites and anniversaries” (2). Untrained in any alternate skill, hesitant to accept new ways, these Brahmins are as much a victim of the caste system as the lower castes. Their blinkered vision smothers the spontaneity of their life.
The listless poverty of the Brahmins of the agrahara is presented in the novel through various episodes. They depended on cucumber during the rainy season for everything, “curry, mash, or soup made with the seeds” (3). They could walk a distance of thirty miles just for attending a festival feast. Comparing Belli with other Brahmin girls, Shripati scathingly remarks, “cheek sunken, breast withered, mouth stinking of lentil soup” (4). Such incidents describe the poverty of the Brahmins, who are traditionally linked with professional choices and cannot escape them. When Praneshacharya takes up wandering, he is approached by a villager who requests him to read “a bit of the future.” Praneshacharya was about to perform the routine Brahmin functions by sheer habit, when he reins himself suddenly and ruefully ponders that one cannot run away from one’s caste, “Even if I leave everything behind, the community clings to me, asking me to fulfil duties the Brahmin is born to” (5). The inescapability of the caste is discernible in the debate which followed Naranappa’s death. He had violated and profaned all codes of conduct, still he could not be treated as an outcaste and “remains a Brahmin in his death” (6).

Another aspect of caste based discrimination which Samskara presents before us is related with the taboos which prohibit a Brahmin to eat food touched/prepared by a member of a different caste. Religious treatises like the Vashishtha Dharma Sutra specify what may be eaten and what may not. It stipulates that a Brahmin cannot eat food given by a shudra. The caste system accepts and encourages a rigid hierarchical structure of social inequality-the greater one’s purity, or lack of contact with pollution, the higher one’s rank is. Dasacharya is afraid of social criticism, if he openly eats food at Manjayya’s place. Being a Smarta, Manjayya is considered to belong to a lower sect of
Brahmins. Dasacharya is afraid that if he eats “cooked stuff in a Smarta house” (7), he may be socially boycotted by his own sect, “I don’t really mind eating in your house. But if those rascals in our agrahara hear about it, no one will invite me to a ceremony again. What can I do, Manjayya?” (8). When Manjayya amusingly assures him of secrecy, Dasacharya asks for some ‘milk, jaggery and plain flat-rice. Secretly delighted that an agrahara Brahmin had come to eat with them, his wife gleefully serves him. Naranappa did not practise such discrimination, yet Chandri was unable to come to terms with his unorthodox behaviour. She repeatedly requests him not to eat food cooked by her. Society can perhaps pardon Naranappa for having close relationship with a lowcaste prostitute, but the fact that he ate what Chandri cooked is still graver; Lakshmana’s statement, in which he lays emphasis on the fact that he, in addition to having a mistress, even ate food cooked by her, makes it amply clear.

Individual cognition of gender is often influenced and conditioned by one’s perception of social stereotypes, and therefore may not remain agentic. Whereas sexual differences are biological and fixed, the notion of gender is a variable constructed by the society. Feminist critics have argued that the “true woman” is an “artificial product that civilization makes, as formerly eunuchs were made” (de Beauvoir 131). The social concept of feminine docility mutilates the assertiveness of women and goads them to seek their fulfillment through domesticity or through others. The social structures of a society, which also control systems of power, impart a particular shape to the concept of gender. “People are made into social men and women by the particular positions which they are allocated in the social order. To understand what it is to be a man or woman in a given society is to grasp the social relations involved” (19). In patriarchal set-ups, gender
divisions are exploitative and oppressive for women. They are treated as subordinate to men. Individual and social understanding of gender notions is reflected in literary texts through characters, plot development, imagery, symbolism and language practices. 

*Samskara* too is not an exception. It poignantly illustrates the indoctrination of centuries, as far as the role and status of women are concerned, against a rural South Indian backdrop. It also shows how this society endeavours to stifle the individuality of women in a gradual but planned way, and encourages men to be insensitive towards it.

The Acharya has no solution to this problem. He consults the sacred palm leaf books in vain. So the jnanamarga ‘the path of knowledge’ fails. Crossing the river, he then seeks a sign from the deity Maruti - where he has been worshipping daily - but this bhaktimarga ‘the path of devotion’ also fails, for the deity gives no sign. Throughout, the Acharya has been hungry, having eaten no food because of the uncremated body lying in the neighbourhood. Although the other Brahmins too apparently do not eat, they find their own ways of satisfying their bodily needs. According to Dr. Kakar, the Indian grasp of reality is ‘relatively tenuous’ because ‘the world of magic and animistic ways of thinking lie close to the surface.’ “We Indians,” Kakar says, ‘use the outside reality to preserve the continuity of the self amidst an ever changing flux of outer events and things.’ Men do not, therefore, actively explore the world; rather, they are defined by it” (Naipaul 103). This negative way of perceiving reality, according to Naipaul, is “fundamental to an understanding of India's backwardness” (Naipaul 104). For Naipaul then, *Samskara* is a mirror unto the backward India and as such an important work.

Knowingly or unknowingly, Anantha murthy (sic) has portrayed a barbaric civilization, where the books, the laws, are buttressed by magic,
and where a too elaborate social organization is unquickened by intellect or creativity (except to the self in its climb to salvation) (Naipaul 109).

But this critique only goes halfway towards an understanding of *Samskara* (interpreting the novel is ‘not the purpose of Naipaul anyway!’); for, throughout the novel, that is, after his ‘fall’, the protagonist is full of existentialist thoughts, and some of them are straight from Jean-Paul Sartre’s well-known monograph Existentialism and Humanism. Anantha Murthy had translated Sartre’s ideas into Kannada in a summary form and published them as an article in a periodical; it was later included in his first collection of critical essays called *Prajne mattu Parisara* (‘Consciousness and Environment’). Without doubt, Anantha Murthy was under the influence of Sartrean existentialism at the time of writing *Samskara*. This anachronism is a literary trope! But Anantha Murthy nativizes it by finding a parallel between existentialism and the traditional Brahminic concept of ‘dualities.’ A good soul’s aim in life is to be liberated from these dualities. Thus the Acharya’s inner conflicts proceed on these mutually opposed twin rails of existentialism and the karma theory of preordainment. Nevertheless, it is the existentialist doctrine that seems to both explain his present plight and promise a motive force for his future actions. In his existentialist manifesto, Sartre holds human freedom to be the essential factor behind action. By exercising one’s freedom to choose, one moves from mere being to becoming. “What man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. In this sense existentialism is optimistic, it is a doctrine of action, and it is only by self-deception, by confusing their own despair with ours that Christians can describe us as without hope” (Sartre 56). Sartre also denies that
existentialism is individualism: “When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men ... To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all” (Sartre 29). Nothing can describe the Acharya’s situation better than these remarks of Sartre. Notice that even his union with Chandri was not a fully conscious decision but surrender to an instinct. The Acharya has to start from scratch and his instinctual union with Chandri may symbolize his nascency.

It stands apart from many other works of the period in its allegorical nature. Allegory in modern literature, according to Georg Lucacs, projects transcendental meaning by negating any meaning immanent in the immediate world of man. Thus, Kafka, for example, “has emptied everyday life of meaning by using the allegorical method; lie has allowed detail to be annihilated by his transcendental Nothingness” (Lucacs 45). Of course, Samskara is very different from Kafka’s novels and yet there is a relationship: Samskara seems to be an allegory of an allegory - it has allegorized the life-world of a man that too has denied meaning to the everyday details surrounding it. The Acharya does not live in the present but in a past that is dead and gone, a past that perhaps never was. He did not know that the transcendental God (an equivalent of Kafka’s ‘transcendental Nothingness’) is dead. It is only when he realizes this that he awakens from his stupor and is capable of perceiving the world around him. “When men cannot observe”, says Naipaul in the book cited earlier, “they don't have ideas; they have obsessions. When people live instinctive lives, something like a collective amnesia
steadily blurs the past” (Naipaul 112). This blurring of the past is also mythification, to use Frank Kermode’s distinction between myth and fiction and ceases to be creative. “Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change” (Kermode 39). *Samskara* is an attempt on the part of Anantha Murthy to defreeze myth to fiction, to set in motion those powers of observation of immediate reality that are so essential for both life and fiction.

In the old days, including the period the novel deals with, outcastes were by and large unacceptable in schools and colleges. The sacred texts with which Praneshacharya is constantly preoccupied were deliberately kept away from them. It is little surprise that they were always treated unfairly in treatises that dealt with mythologies, codes of conduct, and religious practices. A subaltern had no say, was unable to express his point of view or find a representation that was beyond patronizing, in the religious texts or other discursive practices. The marginalization of the sudras is in-built in the very conception and mechanics of the novel. It is expressly about Brahmins and by a Brahmin who is worried about his decaying community. The decline of the Brahmins is throughout linked with half-castes and it is these lesser mortals in the Brahmin eye that are responsible for the destruction of their purity. *Samskara* also involves tradition that one has inherited from one’s ancestors and it is these traditions or *Samskaras* that Praneshacharya stands for. Even Naranappa was a peculiar by-product of these traditions—he had imbibed the Brahminical way of life and prayer from his parents that he gives up after the death of his wife.
Anantha Murthy has lampooned and blown to pieces the myths surrounding the orthodox and hypocritical Brahmins by his use of powerful barbs soaked in honeyed comic vein, irony and satire. Such a strategy was essential keeping in mind the fact that the Brahmins occupied traditionally a pre-eminently high place and any direct criticism of their ways of living could have been quite explosive. The purpose of Anantha Murthy is to make the Brahmin community come out of their hypocritical holiness and to live a normal life. This could be done not by taking the bulls by their horns but to make them realize through irony, satire, humour as well as through myths and symbols so that the statements may appear to be good on surface but are quite devastating implicitly. That is also the reason that Anantha Murthy employs a low-keyed, tongue-in-cheek type of irony, satire and humour so that the orthodox Brahmin community does not take an immediate offence at the novel. There are reports that after the publication of this novel, there were wide-ranging protests against the portrayal of the degenerated Brahmins. It means that the novel did hurt them even when the attack was veiled. Anantha Murthy was thus successful in exposing the hypocrisy and vices of the Brahmins. Here is the description of the death of Naranappa—and the reactions of the Brahmins:

The news of death spread like a fire to the other ten houses of the agrahara. Doors and windows were shut, with children inside. By god’s grace, no Brahmin had yet eaten. Not a human soul there felt a pang at Naranappa’s death, not even women and children. Still in everyone’s heart an obscure fear, an unclean anxiety? Alive, Naranappa was an enemy; dead, a preventer of meals; as a corpse: a problem, a nuisance (56).
The decadence of Brahminism becomes unambiguously clear by the end of the novel. When Naranappa says that Lakshmana is so greedy that “he’ll even lick a copper coin off a heap of shit” (60), he portrays the real weakness of Brahmans for money. Through Naranappa, Murthy demolishes the myths surrounding Brahmans by attacking not only their greed for money and gold but also for the marriages which are arranged not so much according to the ruling stars, or on the bases of gunas in the horoscopes but for economic gains. Anantha Murthy shows that it is not so much Naranappa who is degenerated as the rest of the Brahmin community in agrahara is. Most of the Brahmans portrayed in the novel are hypocritically selfish, greedy, narrow-minded and even short-sighted, but who take shelter behind the ancient Hindu classics, their high-sounding principles and the traditional morality which serve as masks to hide their ugly self. In contrast, Naranappa may appear to be unbrahminical by taking liquor, eating meat and living with Chandri, but he is at least true to himself.

There is also a glaring contrast between the Brahmans and non-Brahmins. When viewed in totality, the Brahmans come out worse off than the non-Brahmins, and lower also to the degenerated Brahmans. Take the cases of Naranappa and his mistress Chandri. Naranappa abandoned his Brahmin wife and was keeping a lowcaste woman Chandri as his mistress. He does everything contrary to Brahminical norms, and is therefore considered a degenerated Brahmin. However, Anantha Murthy places him way above the so-called pure Brahmans who have been portrayed as greedy, myopic, selfish and hypocrite. A true picture is portrayed by the 70-year old Lakshmidevamma who stands before Garudacharya’s house, calling him a “ruiner of towns” and a “widow-taker.”
Between Garudacharya and Naranappa, she considers the former the more dangerous of the two:

You villain! A golden man like Naranappa became an outcaste, got himself a harlot. You fellows call yourself Brahmins, you sit there and don’t want to take out a dead man’s body. Where has your Brahminism gone, you rascals! . . . Brahminism is in ruins. Why don’t you shave your heads and become Muslims, why do you need to be Brahmins, you! (61).

Shripati contrasts Brahmin women with a non-Brahmin Chandri, showering praises not only of Chandri’s beauty but also of her virtues as a faithful woman.

What does it matter if she’s a whore? You tell me, didn’t she behave better than any wife with Naranappa? If he drank too much and vomited, she wiped up the mess. She even wiped ours up, didn’t she? Anytime, even at midnight, when he woke her up she cooked and served him, all smiles. Which Brahmin woman would do so much? Stupid shaven widows! (62).

After ensuring a proper cremation of Naranappa’s body, Chandri wanted to go away to Kundapura and “weep for him there.” She had eaten his salt and must remain true to him. This is precisely what she does. Ironically, Praneshacharya who in the beginning of the novel did not want to talk to Chandri for fear of being polluted, towards the end pales before her in goodness, fidelity and in fulfilling moral obligations.
Women appear in primarily two contexts, namely the economic and the sexual, as the plight of insecure Brahminhood is being delineated. We have said that the realist mode allows a representation of the quotidian, the everyday in agrahara life, and helps to understand its decaying insecurity. In this effort, women are shown first, as the weak points in the ritual economy (or the balance of forces involved in ritual practices) in the agrahara. The women are crucial in the connection between a ritual economy and a money economy in propping up an impoverished Brahmin caste who continued in their priestly duties while many of their caste brethren had progressed economically through mirasdaris (land ownership), or civil service and administrative posts obtained under the British. In the ritual economy, women’s impurity directly affects their husbands’ livelihood. That is, if women are impure their men may find no way to survive, to feed themselves or their families. The text repeatedly refers to the difficulty a ritual Brahmin has in obtaining a meal. At the same time, the women are depicted as lusting after gold. When Chandri steps forward to offer her gold jewelry for the expenses of Naranappa’s rite:

The women calculated swiftly: that heap of gold was worth at least two thousand rupees. One after another, the wives scanned their husbands’ faces. The Brahmins bowed their heads: they were afraid, fearful lest the lust for gold might destroy Brahmin purity. But in the heart of every one of them flashed the question: if some other Brahmin should perform the final rite for Naranappa, he might keep his Brahminhood and yet put all that gold on his wife’s neck (64).
My dilemma, my decision, my problem wasn’t just mine, it included the entire agrahara. This is the root of the difficulty, the anxiety, the double-bind of dharma.... In every act we involve our forefathers, our gurus, our gods, our fellow humans. ... Did I feel such conflict when I lay with Chandri? (67).

It is pointed out how the representation of lower-class women as nothing but sexual erases an important pre-modern context for prostitution as mediating the relations between upper-caste men and lower-caste women, namely the Devadasi system.

The Brahmin, as the highest in the social ranking, must at all times be ritually pure since he, as the spokesman for the community, intercedes with the Gods. The Shudra, on the other hand, the lowest of the four classes, performs most of the polluting tasks. Thus, labour among the social classes-is divided on the basis of purity and impurity. Caste governs social relationship and confers a sense of identity on the individual. Intercaste marriage is taboo as it leads to pollution. Sexual relations across caste boundaries are considered equally polluting as they lead to confusion of classes (Varna Samskara). For this reason, a woman's sexual behaviour is carefully guarded.

A person’s social rank, too, was determined by his karma in a previous life. There is no such thing as an accident of birth, for a person determines what he becomes by his action. A low-caste person, thinks he must expiate numerous ‘sins’ committed in past life, and that leading an exemplary life will earn him a better fate the next time around. The lower castes therefore have everything to gain by strict compliance with ritual demands. The Shudra’s internalization of the Hindu order made them accept their abject
social and economic position as legitimate. The untouchables were perceived as the indispensable complement to Brahmins. This was a stereotypical and idealized picture.

The non-Brahmin movements in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra in the 20th century seriously contested the Brahminical notion of caste. These movements focused on the really degrading conditions of the lower castes and exposed the exploitative and repressive nature of the caste system. Though Gandhi too criticized untouchability, he supported the caste system and advocated Varnashrama dharma, that is, caste based division of labour. Ambedkar, on the other hand, viewed the caste system as the most vile and exploitative institution of Hinduism.

In modern India caste still remains an important marker of a person’s identity. Tradition cannot be forgotten overnight, however desirable this may be. Caste is a fact of existence in secular India, and untouchability though illegal, has not entirely disappeared. Durvasapura is a microcosm of Brahmin India. The writing of the novel can be viewed as a Samskara—a rite of expiation, to atone for the oppressiveness of Brahminism. In Samskara the Brahmins and the untouchables form the two poles of the Hindu social order, representing the pure, and the impure. The notion of Dharma and Karma pervade the whole text. These concepts form the core of Pranesh’s dilemma as he debates between action and non-action. These karmic notions at the heart of Hindu philosophy are negotiated from a purely Brahminical point of view. The fact that these Karmic notions of Brahminism were used as tools of repression and exploitation of the lower castes and the untouchables remains completely erased from the discourse of the text.
Lakshmana’s speech is an acknowledgement of the power of the secular law over the religions in modern India. When it becomes impractical, the Brahmins disregard their religious laws. Being an upper caste male, Naranappa is able to successfully invoke the secular laws of the land for his protection, from his greedy, neighbours. The references to the Congress Party, the Army, and court litigation being fought by the agrahara Brahmins all reflect the Brahminical male’s participation in the modern secular world outside.

The women, on the other hand, do not participate in this world. The upper caste woman’s domain was to maintain the ritual purity of the Brahmins. The Brahmins enforce repressive control over the upper caste women’s sexuality. The text represents them as sexually repressed and unattractive. This is used to legitimize the sexual transgressions of the Brahmin male.

Chandri, Naranappa’s mistress, occupies a space that is ambiguous. As a prostitute Chandri anyway falls outside the social order. Chandri epitomizes the position of the outcaste in Hindu Brahmin society. She lives within Naranappa’s house, does all the wifely duties and yet is not a wife. She therefore has no legal right over his property or death rites. Her gender, caste and transgressive social position render her unfit. Ironically it is Chandri who inherits Naranappa’s gold and cremates him.

In his attempt to highlight Brahmin degeneracy, Anantha Murthy imbues the lower caste Chandri, with a positive and regenerative potential. Chandri is represented as selfless, giving and caring. She is like Mother Nature and is compared to the Tunga river which washes away all sins. She is a life-giver, she mediates between the world of Praneshacharya and Naranappa. She initiates Praneshacharya into the material world of
physical and sensual pleasures. She acts as the catalyst for his initiation into the real world of men. She symbolizes the positive life giving force of Nature. Her fertility and fecundity is emphasized through her desire for a child by Praneshacharya the holy man; the modern day parallel to the sages of ancient times. Throughout the novel, the allegorical and the real co-exist. Thus, it would be wrong to see Chandri as only an allegorical, symbolic, mythic being. She is a real woman and reveals real feelings and desires. Most critics highlight her symbolic, aesthetic and allegorical significance in the text and gloss over her real status vis-a-vis the Brahmin society. This is probably because Anantha Murthy has represented her mainly in this manner, and she does not represent herself. Most of the time she is represented and figured through the lusting gaze of the Brahmin men of the agrahara. She is the ‘object’ of their collective fantasy and desire. Except Praneshacharya, all the other men in the agrahara envy Naranappa's luck in having her as his mistress.

   Significantly when Chandri does represent herself, her self-delineation is through her mother. Being the daughter of a prostitute she does not know who her father is. She is the transgressing female, an outcaste. As a prostitute she remains outside society and its rigid moral code. Social norms defining codes for wives, and widows do not apply to her. Yet she desires a child by Praneshacharya. Though a very natural instinct, it also reflects her internalization of Hindu concepts regarding prostitutes. “Chandri was afraid that Praneshacharya might scold her, despise her. There was also a hope in her that his touch might bear fruit in her body. And a gratefulness that she too might have earned merit” (68). Matsyagandhi is the scriptural representation of the lower caste woman in the text. Chandri hopes to be as blessed as Matsyagandhi was in the myth. The lower caste woman
believes that she can hope to attain salvation by serving and satiating the sexual passion of the God-like Brahmin ascetic. This was the argument behind the Devadasi system which exploited the sexuality of lower caste women in the name of service to God. These women were in fact sexually exploited by the priestly Brahmins.

The text fails to give representation to lower caste perceptions of the caste system which was radically different from the Brahmin view of consensus and harmony. Though there is consensus and internalization of the caste system by the untouchables, they also represent themselves differently. They are both part of society and yet separate. The caste system exempts the lower castes from certain purificatory rites or Samskaras. ‘Manu lays down that a Shudra may not carry a Brahmin’s corpse’ (Dumont 483). This exemption made them less ritualistic and more practical. Chandri’s disposal of Naranappa’s corpse is an instance of such practical wisdom. But it is not adequately highlighted as representing a positive alternative and counter discourse to Brahminic philosophy.

If the Brahmin life is all about Dharma, then the Shudra life revolves around Karma or action. While the Brahmin maintains his Dharma, the Shudra attends to his karma of doing menial but practical jobs to preserve the Brahminical purity. The Brahmins made a virtue out of non-action. And Praneshacharya’s fear of action stems from having internalized this concept.

Samskara seems to have left no stone unturned in unveiling the hypocrisy of orthodoxy of the Brahmin community of South India of the 1930s and 1940s. In fact, it’s a big mockery of the South Brahmins of those times and Anantha Murthy despite being a Brahmin himself unravels the orthodox practices which affected the social environment.
and brought irreparable doom to the entire sect of the so-called high class Brahmin group, the Madhvas. In *Samskara* the plague spreads to the entire agrahara. The novel recounts a sad childhood experience of Anantha Murthy’s own agrahara. As the author writes in one of his articles on *Samskara*:

I was barely 13 years old when some momentous things happened in my little Agrahara. Everyone was talking about an imminent ‘Pralaya.’ If everyone was going to be destroyed, I thought in my childish innocence, people will be very generous and my parents will not say ‘no’ to any indulgence of mine. I used to have dreams of rice Roti being eaten in the night previous to the Pralaya with all the honey and ghee my mother had kept locked. Not only Pralaya, but I was also witness to actual death all round me. Four miles away was my high school which was closed because of plague in the town. People began to die along with the rats. In my village only the pariahs died. That was because, I had realized, the orthodox doctor had not gone to inoculate against plague - they were untouchables. Although I was surrounded by all these people, something in me was stirred against all these superstitious beliefs (Anantha Murthy 69).

Talking to Chandri means that the Brahmin has to take another bath to purify himself. This clearly shows the casteism that existed then and would later on engulf the entire society. The irony is that these high class Brahmins fall flat right on their noses as they are unable to keep up their set rules and succumb to the very human shortcomings of greed and lust which they despise in the members of the inferior sections.
As the novel depicts, to the Brahmins free meals are more important than cremating the body of a fellow Brahmin. Again, as is customary the Brahmins cannot take their meal until the dead body is cremated. As such, excluding their children the entire Brahmin sect were starved for days. At this crucial juncture, Dasacharya, unable to suppress his hunger, went to Parijatapura, the place of the lower clan of Brahmins whom the Madhvas looked down upon and despised because of their less orthodox outlook:

Unseen by anyone, he went to the waters of the Tunga river, bathed in the burning sun and walked towards Parijatapura. He soon stood in the shade of Manjayya’s thatched canopy. How could he ask here openly for food? In all his born days, he hadn’t touched water in the houses of these crosslined Brahmins. After all, he was a Brahmin who lived on ritual meals. Bad things will happen if others hear about . . . Dasacharya stood there in a trance, looking only at the uppittu (74).

When Manjayya offered him food, he pretended being afraid of his agrahara people coming to know about it and the consequence thereof. As he says: “I don’t really mind eating in your house. But if those rascals in our agrahara hear about it, no one will invite me to a ceremony again. What can I do, Manjayya?” (75). Further, when he starts eating he makes some more funny gestures: “Dasacharya rubbed his belly to the name of the supreme spirit, and didn’t say No. Just for courtesy’s sake, he pretended to cover his eating leaf with his hands, . . . ‘Enough. Enough. Must leave some for you’” (76).

Dasacharya’s eating at Manjayya’s house is hilarious indeed, bringing out the greed and weakness of Brahmins for good food in utter disregard of the Brahminic need
for austerity. Another instance of greediness of these Brahmins is when they greedily eye Chandri’s gold jewellery, which she takes out and places in front of the entire sect as a price for having Naranappa’s body cremated.

As gold is desired by everybody, so is it by Brahmins. After catching sight of Chandri's gold, Lakshmanacharya and Garudacharya see little reason for an argument as to who should be allowed to do the cremation. In fact, this is a show of their human weakness no matter how far they may feign their disinterestedness in these worldly desires. How far can one renounce material desires? And for that matter how far can they go in attempting or practising at renouncing physical desires? It is just impossible. After all the holy Hindu scriptures are full of lusty stories of Gods and Godesses and this is also one strong reason for the young Brahmin youths gathering in front of Praneshacharya’s house every evening. The Brahmins are no models of material renunciation nor of physical renunciation. One incident to support this point is when Praneshacharya decides to give up telling the luscious puranic stories of Shakuntala and Menaka out of disgust because Naranappa had accused him once.

‘You read those lush sexy puranas, but you preach a life of barenness.’ He gave up telling the luscious puranic stories in the evenings and started on moral tales of penance. The result—his own enthusiasm for reciting the puranas faded and died. The young listeners who used to look at him with lively eyes and bring joy to his heart—they stopped coming. Only women bent on earning merit, uttering the names of god over yawns in the middle of the stories, and old men, were his audience now (77).
Praneshacharya who tried his best to bring back the Brahminic way of life faces failure and in the long run he too fails to live up to his status of a pious Brahmin, despite being himself the best of his entire sect. All his life he had tended tirelessly his invalid wife and kept himself far from the carnal world and yet he was happy with his lot. He felt his marrying an invalid and serving her was one of his greatest achievements as a pious Brahmin in his path to salvation as is depicted in the very beginning of the novel.

But later after he sleeps with Chandri in the darkness of the forest he wants to throw away his Brahminic ways. He feels guilty of his act, of his inability to control his sexual urge and indulging himself in the arms of the lowcaste woman. But it is the human in him which had made him act in that manner. All his Brahminic philosophy undergoes a sudden change after that experience. He wants to be with Chandri again and even starts fantasizing about other lowcaste women:

He remembered the darkness in which Chandri had fed him the plaintains from her lap . . . He’d heard that a young lad went to the river bank and slept with an outcaste girl there, after hearing his description of Shakuntala. The Acharya’s fantasy dragged in all the untouchable girls he’d never thought of; stripped them and looked at them (78).

The novel is on the realistic plane as it shows sexual desire of a normal man leaping out of Praneshacharya fiercely with a vengeance. All his long suppressed desires erupt like a powerful volcano. All vows of celibacy are thrown to the winds. Thus the attempt of a holy Brahmin to trudge the path of celibacy is nothing except hypocrisy and an exercise in futility.
The final and the most lethal blow to orthodoxy is the spread of plague in the agrahara after Naranappa dies of it. Not even once do the Brahmins try to know the cause of his death. They look utterly ignorant even after rats come out of their holes dying right in front of their eyes in all the Brahmin houses. They think only of Naranappa’s death rite which remains undecided despite a lot of discussion and arguments. Naranappa had in fact died of plague which he contacted from Shivamogge and since his dead body lay uncremated it was very natural for the rats to eat and die of it and spread the plague to the entire agrahara. Naranappa’s death was followed by Dasacharya’s and then Praneshacharya’s wife’s and a host of others. In the untouchables’ colony too people were dying of plague and the huts were set on fire along with the dead bodies.

The once proud Brahmins are helpless in the hands of a deadly disease. Their ignorance of medical science has made them an easy prey to plague. It is disheartening that none of them even contemplates about consulting a doctor except the one thoughtful, outgoing Brahmin Manjayya of Parijatapura who shows some understanding. The moment he hears of the rats running out of the agrahara and dying in Durvasapura he quickly warns his fellow Brahmins to take safety measures. He even arranges to go immediately to inform the municipality to get Naranappa’s dead body removed, calls in doctors and gets everybody inoculated. He arranges for rat exterminators and pumps. The orthodox Madhvas are left at their wits’ end. They are utterly dejected and hopeless. The Brahmins are shaken by the menace of the plague. Had they been a little cautious and a little bit aware of modern medicine and a little large-hearted, they would not have faced the catastrophe. Throughout the novel the need to fight Brahminic orthodoxy is clearly
visible. Anantha Murthy’s voice calling for a new life sans the evils of Brahminhood is echoed. As Dunkin Jalki points out:

The solution to the orthodoxy of Brahminism and its resultant casteism thus basically involves giving up all kinds of rituals and practices traditionally associated with Brahminism. Praneshacharya, after a disappointment with Brahminism, does what Naranappa did for years; wanders through forests and lonely roads, sleeps with the prostitute Chandri, thinks of sleeping with another, visits fairs and cockfights, and eats in a temple in an unclean condition. Despite all these, a sad realization haunts him: “he may have rejected Brahminhood, but Brahminhood never left him”. As a matter of fact, Praneshacharya makes this statement about Naranappa. Nevertheless, very soon he finds himself trapped in this truth. It goes without saying that this realization is not just of Praneshacharya but also that of the author (Jalki 191).

Jalki further adds, quoting Anantha Murthy himself as in the following lines:

“Anantha Murthy does not shy away from accepting that he criticizes Brahmins. “Hurting Brahmins for me born and brought up as a Brahmin, is not an issue that I like, but is inevitable. My writings like Samskara, ‘Ghatashraddha,’ Bharatipura, have hurt Brahmins. . . .What I’ve written are the essential truth that Brahmins must face” (Anantha murthy 107).

Anantha Murthy’s mocking representation of Brahminhood and its orthodoxy in Samskara may no doubt have offended the Brahmin communities of the south. As A.K.
Ramanujan writes in Afterword of his English translation of the novel: “Certain Brahmin communities in South India were offended by the picture of decadent Brahminism. They felt that Brahmin men and women were unfairly caricatured; they were offended by the novelist’s rather intrusive partiality for Naranappa and the Sudra women” (79).

**Samskara** must have hurt the sentiments of the South Indian Brahmin community to a considerable extent but Murthy’s work could prove of immense benefit to the Brahmin community. The author has come out with a very realistic rendering of the evil practices of the highly orthodox Brahmin community of the South and his fearless presentation of the orthodoxy-ridden community with all its flaws and worthlessness is indeed a priceless effort which has cut through the barriers of language, religion, sex and caste, making the novel the most readable, thought-provoking and unforgettable window on the life of the orthodox Brahmins of South India.

Critical response to **Samskara** has come from many different perspectives. Ramanujan, for instance, sums it up as a “religious novel, a contemporary re-working of ancient themes” (Naipaul 143). He sees the characters in sets of polar opposites, one acting as a foil to another, and concludes that the novel “naturally” tends to be an allegory. Its theme, for Ramanujan, is the “complex relations between asceticism and eroticism”.

In Praneshacharya, he says, “Brahminism questions itself in a modern existentialist mode (a mode rather alien to it ...)” (Naipaul 141). On the other hand, for V. S. Naipaul, the novel dramatizes one man’s search for identity and the novel “takes us closer to the Indian idea of the self, and without too much mystification” (Naipaul 104).
The Acharya’s obsessive, almost neurotic, reliance on the scriptures, he believes, represents Anantha Murthy’s indictment of the Indians’ social mythography.

Praneshacharya’s experience in the woods with Chandri reveals a play of themes and motifs like a maze of mirrors. On the one hand, it is a fulfillment of what he has been denied with Bhagirathi. If his invalid wife represents his destiny to remain celibate and to forego the pleasures of passionate intimacy, Chandri serves as the agent defeating that destiny, one who awakens him to a life that he never knew he had. She punctures his blindness towards his repressed desires, in the process bringing him an insight he was incapable of on his own. By sleeping with Chandri, he learns what Naranappa knew all along, that breaking social taboos and challenging communal superstitions does not lead to all hell breaking loose upon the violator, that fear is often a culture’s tool of repression. A new Praneshacharya is born, redeeming the old one of his life of deprivation and asceticism; a new Chandri is born too, the old cleaned away by her “pregnant” meeting with the holy man. Both are purged of their pasts, one by throwing away his shallow-superstitions and fulfillment of her prophetic wishes.

Published almost five decades ago, U.R. Anantha Murthy’s Samskara is still compelling for its depiction of a social and historical ethos that he subjects to trenchant criticism in an enduring imaginative manner. His novel dramatizes with astonishing artistic richness and compression the forces of disintegration within a Brahmin community and the protagonist's complex relations to it and to himself. It powerfully critiques and subverts a social system erected on degraded and unexamined cultural-religious foundations. The novel generates a kind of “contrapuntal reading,” one that enables it to instinctively cast a critical eye upon itself. It invites one to read it with an
awareness of both the tradition and its power on the society it impacts and of the meaning and implications of resistances to it generated by both the highly secularized and corrupt antagonist, Naranappa, and a host of problems and difficulties occasioned by his dead body for the community mired in an unthinking relation to its tradition. Anantha Murthy’s text is thus framed by a larger context of tradition as well as representations of resistances to it, as embodied in the protagonist and the antagonist. It presents conflicts and tensions not only as the site of demythologization and thus of modernity, but also as the site of contrapuntal analysis and self-criticism. It dramatizes the context and practice of the dominant discourse as lived in the culture of the community and pits against that context, other contexts and practices that contest and complicate the dominant discourse.

In presenting a diversity of attitudes and interests, Anantha Murthy captures the complexity and tensions of a highly traditional village community in modern India. The narrative exemplifies Mikhail Bakhtin’s dictum in The Dialogic Imagination that “the novel must be a microcosm of heteroglossia” (Bakhtin). Anantha Murthy presents this diversity not only through the characters with their different attitudes but also in the way in which the social-psychological struggle is expressed in different discourses and actions. The nearly speechless Praneshacharya, the virtually speechless prostitute, the noisy and aggressive Naranappa, the whining and selfish chatter of various Brahmin males and their wives, the Muslim who cremates the corpse, the young pimp Putta who tries to lure Praneshacharya to a prostitute - all these together constitute a microcosm of communities in South India and its densely filled social panorama, even though the novel is concerned primarily with portraying the happenings in a small Brahmin community. The novel combines a span of several days in the present with flashbacks covering a
number of years going back to the protagonist’s school years, and the intertwining of chronologies and narratives of different characters and events giving a vivid and complex picture of the community. This enables the narrator to give a strong portrayal of the instabilities and complications within the community’s life, especially the resentments and frustrations that have accumulated over the years.

All the members of the Brahmin community, except its religious leader, Praneshacharya, are unthinkingly rule-bound as well as selfish, dishonest, and corrupt. The dead man, on the other hand, was, while alive, a reckless and boisterous Brahmin, consorting with Muslims, prostitutes, and low-caste men and women, and thus he had been a challenge to his community and its leader. In death, he becomes the source of defiance to the point of plunging the community into crisis. Through this crisis, Praneshacharya seems to be moving away from an unreflective relation to his tradition and all its stultifying implications for his society to a greater critical self-consciousness about himself and the way he must think and conduct his life.

But if I don’t tell the agrahara Brahmins, if Naranappa’s body is not properly cremated, I cannot escape fear. If I decide to live with Chandri without telling anyone, the decision is not complete, not fearless. I must now come to a final decision. All things indirect must become direct. ... But it is agony either way. ... Have I the authority to include another’s life in my decision? The pain of it, the cowardice of it. O God, take from me the burden of decision. Just as it happened in the dark of the jungle, without my will, may this decision too happen. . . Naranappa. did you go through this agony? Mahabala. did you go through it? (81).
However, the protagonist never indulges in any kind of self-recrimination, never considers himself irredeemably lost and fallen. His agonies are motivated by a desire to find some moral and intellectual clarity and coherence: “‘When, I tell them about myself, there should be no trace of any sorrow that I am a sinner. If not, I cannot go beyond conflict and dualities. I must see Mahabala. Must tell him: only the form we forge for ourselves in our inmost will is ours without question’” (82). This is nascent modernist individualism emerging in Praneshacharya who wants to reject all trace of repentance, any acknowledgement or belief that he is a sinner who seeks to escape the bondage of “conflict or dualities.” He cannot sustain this line of reflection for long, however. He immediately asks: “If that is true, don’t you really have any craving for good anymore? -I must ask him’”. Even as he thinks of joining the ranks of his renegade friend Mahabala, a definite “craving for good” remains. He asks himself, how can one be wholly free of such craving? Thus certain ideals of the tradition, however defined or articulated, continue to have a sway over his mind. In portraying this state, Anantha Murthy has produced an exemplary image of the conflict between tradition and modernity within the context of Hinduism in modern India. In this polyphonic novel, to borrow Bakhtin’s words, “everything is still in the future and will always be in the future” (Bakhtin 166).

Though Samskara has been subtitled A Rite for a Dead Man it has been defined as ‘realizing of past perceptions’ and should be understood as such not merely in its restricted sense as funeral rites. When one looks back after reading the novel, one is struck by the text’s preoccupation with Brahminism and sub-human underpinning of the outcaste characters. These subaltern are mostly women and their marginalization in the novel is the result of the Brahmin society’s obsession with itself. The pressures of the changing times work on the Brahmins but the sudras or out-castes are never allotted their due share in the social set up nor is there any effort made to redeem their plight.
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