CHAPTER IV
CLAIMING THE RIGHT TO RITES

All communities have their own set of beliefs, practices and customs that they follow quite religiously though changes may have been prompted in an ever evolving society. Likewise the Brahmin community also practices a religious code of conduct that members of the community are expected to adhere to. Any violation of these principles is viewed with disdain and can even lead to excommunication of the individual from its fold. As a member of the community, an individual has a right to enjoy the rituals that are performed during all occasions, auspicious and inauspicious. Much significance is attributed to the rite performed for the dead to attain moksha or deliverance. Samskara is about the right the dead Naranappa has to the funeral rites, having been born into the community, despite his contempt for its archaic customs and beliefs.

Situated in the tiny hamlet of Durvasapura, in the Western Ghats of South India, Samskara (1965) recounts the moral crisis experienced by a decadent Madhva Brahmin community when faced with the death of one of their own, Naranappa, whose corpse has to be cremated. As Naranappa has no children, his funeral rites have to be performed by either his relatives or by any other Brahmin. His two relatives distance themselves from him, on the grounds of a long drawn family dispute, the fact that he had lived with a lowcaste woman and above all, that he had lived a life of a heretic with total disregard for brahminism and brahminical principles.

The dilemma of the community rests on moral and ethical considerations. The Madhvas, followers of Madhvacharya, who advocated dvaita or dualism, were expected
to lead their lives in accordance with the principles laid down by the Holy Book and anyone who transgressed from them was ostracized. In fact in keeping with the letter rather than the spirit of the law, Praneshacharya, their spiritual leader had taken an invalid for wife in the hope of attaining salvation. Naranappa had flouted all norms, making him unworthy of being a Brahmin. However, despite him having rejected brahminhood by leading the life of a libertine, as he had not been excommunicated officially, he had the right to be cremated according to Brahmin rites. Allowing someone else to perform the rites would amount to sullying their brahminhood. With no one coming forward to perform the rituals, the crisis shows all signs of worsening, as the body lay rotting, with threats of far reaching dire social consequences. As the story progresses, the dead rats and mysterious illness that the people of Durvasapura fall prey to, points to an outbreak of plague which throws the social life totally out of gear. Although the primary concern in Samskara is the right to rites, how this concern entails a larger one with social implications is the crux of the novel.

Exploring the metaphysical and social aspects of Hinduism which propounds that a set of rituals be observed at birth as well as at the time of death to attain moksha, in Samskara, the author tries to shatter all notions of orthodoxy and a decadent value system which shapes the Indian psyche. Behind the seemingly innocent question of the right to rites, is the strong hold that caste has over the lives of the Brahmin community. Caste has always played an important role in determining the social hierarchy of the Indian social system. The social order of India depends on caste which can also be the cause for social disintegration. Based primarily on the occupations, the caste system had its roots in ancient India and thereafter turned out to be an influencing factor in the Indian social
structure. The British presence on Indian soil brought about a change in thinking which was reflected in post independent India. The effect of colonization as well as western education gave rise to a new lot of young intellectuals who seemed to be inspired by western ideology. At the same time it was not easy to break away completely from tradition. Writers like U R Ananthamurthy chose to give expression to this clash between tradition and modernity in their novels. Naranappa who not only openly defies the caste system but criticizes the decadent traditions of the Brahmins could very well be Ananthamurthy’s spokesman. This theory gains credence as the theme is also treated in Bharathipura(1973) where Ananthamurthy again contests the caste factor which is deep rooted in the Indian consciousness. Jagannatha, the western educated liberal in the novel finds himself an alien in his own land. In order to establish equality and justice in a caste ridden society, he tries to desecrate the shaligrama (the holy stone) by forcing the untouchables to ‘touch and defile it’. His forced entry into the temple with the untouchables meets with stiff resistance by the untouchables themselves who have to be finally pushed inside. The disappearance of the idol of Lord Manjunatha inside the sanctum sanctorum is attributed to the power of the lord to have been removed so as not to be desecrated by the entry of the Holeyaru (untouchables) inside the temple. Ironically, in the end, Jagannatha’s action only serves to reconstruct and reinforce the hierarchy of caste in the community.

In writing Samskara, Ananthamurthy was coming to terms with the realities of his own oppressive Madhva Brahman past in a remote village in Karnataka. The writing itself can be viewed as a samskara – a rite of expiation, to atone for Brahmanism when its orthodoxies were being questioned and criticized during the reformist movement which
was sweeping the country in the 1930s and 40s. Once a strong presence, the Brahmin tradition saw itself losing out with the arrival of Islam in the 12th century, the Europeans in the 16th century and finally the fall of the Vijayanagar Empire in 1565. The dilemma that the Brahmin community went through in the face of the emerging forces of a new social ethos is reflected through the novel written in 1965.

4.1 THEMES

In its attempt to seek an answer to the crisis caused by Naranappa’s death, Samskara explores several themes. Together with the question of the right to rites, notions of self exile, isolation, separation, dilemma and choices emerge. As the clash of tradition and modernity rears its head, the themes of individualism versus community, idealism versus reality, the existential dilemma in the quest for meaning, the irrelevance of Brahmin values and ideals – all come to the forefront with equal force. Samskara treats two very important aspects of the Indian social and cultural life – religion and caste. Refuting the religious sanctions of casteism and orthodoxy, Ananthamurthy attempts to show how the practice of orthodoxy and blind rituals to attain moksha(deliverance) can actually hamper the social and economic development of a community rather than promote it. The effect of orthodoxy and casteism is played out through the two subcastes, the Madhvas of Durvasapura and the Smartas of Parijatapura; the higher caste and the lower caste men; and the Brahmin wives and the lowcaste women.

Social cohesion is an important theme explored in Samskara. This is seen in the convergence of the Brahmins immediately on hearing the news of Naranappa’s death but the very social order seems to disintegrate with all refusing to perform his funeral rites.
Some of the other themes that emerge in the novel are the fragility of the ideals on which Brahminism stands, the struggle between the free will and rules or norms, the conflict between order and the self, the rigidity of the Brahmins of Durvasapura against the modern face of social mores represented by Naranappa and finally the search for meaning and selfhood in a changing world.

The Indian culture is deeply rooted in tradition and customs. Getting away from them is not so easy is obvious when Praneshacharya, to get away from the hustle of the market place with its repulsive sights seeks refuge in the temple where a feast is in progress but finds himself troubled by the thoughts, “What lowborn misdeed am I committing? I’m in the unclean period of mourning and can I in full knowledge sit with the Brahmins and eat a meal? And pollute them with my impurity?”(128). Praneshacharya finds himself in a dilemma - not confessing would mean, to continue to be plagued by the fear of discovery, and confessing would mean sullying Brahminism. Meenakshi Mukherjee epitomizes the pain and agony to that of one “transcending one mode of existence to go into another, from being an epic hero to the problematic hero of a novel”(97). It is the spiritual crisis of a man who had hitherto held steadfast to his ideals and now feels guilty for having strayed from the path. Though the immediate reaction on realizing his folly is to run away, he decides to return, strengthened by the self realization of the experience he had gained and the reality that he cannot go back to his earlier state. Preparing himself to face the Brahmins, he tells himself that when he tells them about himself there should be no taint of repentance or sorrow that he was a sinner. As to whether he does is left to the imagination of the reader. By leaving the novel open ended, Ananthamurthy prefers to take an ambivalent stand, either because he is unsure of
himself or refrains from further ruffling the feathers of a community whose sensibilities he had already offended through the portrayal of Naranappa and the withered womenfolk. Together with Praneshacharya who waits, anxious, expectant, the reader is confronted by a flood of uncertainties – the crisis of Brahminism, the dilemma of choice, the rebel breaking the social and moral order and the ethical problematic self.

_Samskara_ also explores the theme of life after death. One of the metaphysical aspects of religions is that a glorious life after death awaits those who lead an exemplary life of good faith, honesty and piety on earth. Orthodox Hindus yearn to achieve _moksha_ or deliverance from birth and death. In the novel, Ananthamurthy probes this existential question through the character of Praneshacharya, a priest who has a sound knowledge of the scriptures and who is hailed as the “Crest Jewel of Vedic Learning”. Interpreting the Vedas as he deems right, he leads a life of austerity and abstinence, taking “a dried-up wasted pea-pod”(1) as wife and denying himself the pleasures of an ordinary married man. Praneshacharya should have, if he had understood the _vedas_ properly, been in the third phase of his life as a married man and a provider. As Parthasarathy (190-91) points out, the life of an individual according to Hindu tradition is divided into four stages. As soon as his investiture with the sacred thread is over, the novice (bramachari) is instructed in the Vedas in the home of his teacher. Once he completes his studies, he returns home, gets married and lives the life of a householder (grihastha). After fulfilling his obligations as a husband and father, he retires to the forest to become a hermit (vanasprastha). Then after a life of penance and meditation, he cuts all ties with the world and becomes a renouncer (sanyasi). Ironically, the Acharya instead of living the life of a householder is “filled with pleasure and a sense of worth as sweet as the five-fold
nectar of holy days”, as he believes that “by marrying an invalid, I get ripe and ready”(2). In the hope of attaining moksha in his after life, Praneshacharya actually denies himself a meaningful life. Ananthamurthy through the decision of the Acharya probes the question of how best to achieve the so-called supra-existence that has been discussed by human beings since the rise of religion.

The very social order that the novel is based on revolves round the puritanical values of the upper caste and the seemingly frivolous values of the lower caste. As it is there had been a crisis with Naranappa not only leading a very unbrahmanic way of life, but by opening flaunting his relations with a low caste woman. In addition to whether caste has its origin in religion, the caste factor disturbs the social life as it entails a series of problems. Even as the Brahmins are hesitant to perform the last rites they are also aware that “until the body is properly removed there can be no worship, no bathing, no prayers, no food, nothing” (12). The Brahmins of Durvasapura find themselves in a dilemma – the fear of starving to death if the body is not cremated and the fear of sullying their brahminhood if they do perform the rites. Their concern is more the former than the latter as they go to the Smartas of Parijatapura to ask them to perform the rites. The argument about sullying their brahminhood appears shallow since an answer to such a predicament is said to exist in the Dharmasindhu (religious text) which involves simple modifications in the rituals and offerings. A point worth noting is the complexity of the whole issue. While the Brahmins with all their worldly knowledge flounder over the problem, the untouchables “left the bodies right there and fired the huts” (40) on seeing their people being consumed by a strange illness.
The belief that God will help only the good Brahmin is shattered as proved by the tale from the Rigveda where God goes to the aid of the Brahmin gambler who seeks forgiveness rather than to the Brahmins who hold out offerings. The author through Praneshacharya’s interpretation or rather misinterpretation of the Vedas - his belief that he would be polluted if he spoke to Chandri, that eating in the temple during the pollution period would stop the chariot from moving and that touching an untouchable would pollute one – succeeds in shattering many a myth. Despite the reference to the Vedanta Philosophy as the end, “the anta of all thinking” (29), and that casteism has religious sanctions in the Manu Smriti, it is to be contested whether a dynamic religion like Hinduism can offer such a narrow viewpoint. Not only is Samskara a strong critique of the caste system, it disproves the theory that the caste system has religious sanctions and urges society to get out of decadent values to which it clings blindly.

The theme of exile in Samskara is self imposed and is more an isolation than a real exile. The forest where Praneshacharya goes to Lord Maruti in search of an answer almost seems like the forest where Lord Rama was exiled. But unlike the legendary Rama who was banished from Ayodhya, in the case of Praneshacharya, it is a running away from Durvasapura, from the Brahmin community whom he had failed. The forest offers solace to the weary Acharya as he seeks refuge there. Praneshacharya’s going away, being in seclusion and returning is like the return of the prodigal son. As is often the case in myth and literature, be it in Homer’s Odyssey, Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress, or Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, a journey symbolizes an inward quest – the search for one’s identity, home, soul or true self. Praneshacharya finds himself wandering in existential angst, divested of his high status and taken for a lowly Brahmin on his alms
collection rounds. In an attempt to free himself from religious dogmas as he is initiated into another world that holds out to him pleasures hitherto unknown, Praneshacharya is led on, but whether he can really break free, remains unknown.

The village seems to be in the hold not only of religious beliefs but superstitions as well. Belli feels that Pilla and his wife were struck down by demons and Chandri feels that if Naranappa is not given a proper death-rite, he’ll become an evil spirit. In fact his ghost is already believed to be haunting the village. The vulture on the roof is looked upon as an omen of death. While all of them believe that the disasters are “due to Naranappa’s untimely death and the brahmin’s dereliction of duty in not performing his final rites” (103), only Manjayya, experienced as he is in worldly affairs, knows it to be an epidemic the minute he hears about the dead rats and the vultures and true enough, it is confirmed by the news, though a week old, in the papers—“plague in Shivamogge” (104). The presence of the rats and the description of the strange disease confirm the plague.

The title of the novel itself has multiple meanings as it plays upon the word samskara. Even as the question of who should perform the samskara (death-rite) of Naranappa is debated, the Acharya goes through a samskara, (transformation). The samskara (the refinement of spirit) or lack of it by the orthodox Brahmins of Durvasapura is put to test by Naranappa in life as in death. As Rath opines “Samskara’s message is the assertion of life and its inextinguishable presence in the midst of extinction, not because of but in spite of the forces of nihilism and despair” (100). Naipal is forthright in saying that Samskara is but a reflection of the Indian society and the weak Indian psyche where “people are all helpless, disadvantaged, easily unbalanced; the civilization they have inherited has long gone sour: living instinctive lives, crippled by rules” (109).
Beginning with a linguistic play around the word samskara or the funeral rites for Naranappa, the concerns in *Samskara* revolve round three levels. At the first level, there is the need to cleanse Naranappa’s body of its spiritual impurities; the village of the plague, real and symbolic because of the pollution caused by the corpse; Praneshacharya of his self-deception and self-sacrifice; Chandri of her lowly origin and sins through union with a holy man; and the challenge to brahminic austerity by indulging in hedonistic pleasures through the very same woman. At the second level, with a play on the word *samsara*, the playing field encompasses Durvasapura and Parijatapura, the teams represented by the Madhvas and Smartas respectively; Praneshacharya and Naranappa; the Brahmin wives and Chandri; the high caste and low caste Hindus; Hindus and Muslims, and in a larger sense, the dead and the living. At the third level, just as Lord Shiva, also known as Shankara, comes as a savior, in the cosmic sphere of play, to avert the threat of the extinction of his fellow gods, Praneshacharya through his virtuous life, tries to absorb and absolve the sins of his community.

*Samskara* explores the dilemmas that a community faces in the context of an evolving society. The crisis thrown up by the forces of a new social order leaves a community steeped in tradition and orthodox practices, unprepared to face the challenges. Integrating individual and social crises the novel reveals how individuals and communities are linked to each other. The novel is also demonstrative of the personal dilemmas of individuals as they struggle for an “ethical authenticity of the self” when confronted by social, political and cultural conflicts. In a secular world where traditional practices seem to be locking horns with modern changes there is a crisis which threatens to shake the social order if not addressed in the most rational way possible.
4.2 CHARACTERIZATION

In *Samskara* more than the significance attributed to the legend attached to the village of Durvasapura, is that it is the home of the great ascetic Praneshacharya, who believes that everything is pre-ordained and that all answers to the human predicament can be found in the scriptures. If man wants to attain *moksha* or deliverance from the cycle of rebirth, he has to follow the path of righteousness which the Acharya very religiously does, by tenderly nursing an invalid wife and trying to disperse “the darkness in the brahmins’ heads with chants they did not understand” (17). Unfortunately the Vedas fail to provide him an answer. His search for a solution, first through the *jnanamarga* (the path of knowledge) by consulting the palm leaf books and then through the *bakthimarga* (the path of devotion) yields no result. Caught in an abyss of uncertainty, Praneshacharya finds solace in the lap of Chandri. This episode though, awakens his senses as the “hunger, so far unconscious, suddenly raged” (63). Realizing that he had erred, Praneshacharya’s immediate reaction is to confess his transgressions to the brahmins and say that he can no longer be their guide and philosopher but retracts and sets out to seek the meaning of life.

In Tirumalesh’s view, Ananthamurthy, influenced by “sartrean existentialism, nativizes *Samskara* by finding a parallel between existentialism and the traditional brahminic concept of dualities,” with the Acharya’s internal turmoil operating on the “mutually opposed twin rails of existentialism and the karma theory of pre-ordainment” (79). But it seems to be the Sartrean existential doctrine of the freedom to choose, moving from, “being” to “becoming” that seems to overpower the Acharya in his future course of action. Although his initial brush with Chandri seems instinctive, “touching breasts he
has never touched, Praneshacharya felt faint” (63) the Acharya seeks absolution in the wheel of *karma* with the thought that “even if he had left desire, desire had not left him” (78). Stirred by the pleasure hitherto unknown and “the tamed tiger… leaping out, baring its teeth” (82) the sight of his sickly wife with “her sunken breasts, her bulbous nose, her short narrow braid” (76) disgusts him and the aroused Acharya, “like an animal with his snout to the ground, enters the woods where he had made love to Chandri” and indulges in the pleasure that “the smell of grass-roots smeared with wet earth held him in its power like an addiction” (83).

Reflecting upon his decision to take Chandri, he realizes “even if I lost control, the responsibility to decide was still mine” (98) which makes him wonder how the sages could have stayed with God, “going beyond conflicts and opposites by living with them, taking on every changing shape that earth carves and offers, flowing finally into formlessness in the ocean like a river” (99). The justification of his action goes with the tenets of existentialism that professes the freedom of choice and responsibility. Praneshacharya represents a man of flesh and blood who is prone to falter no matter how traditional a life he has led. The moral man finds himself helpless before a conflict because of the moral characteristics such as responsibility, character, duty, virtues and the like attached to his human condition. This may not be the case with an amoral man as his actions will not be viewed through moralistic eyes. That explains why Naranappa who had led an individualistic life did not find himself in a conflict.

The Acharya knows that he is fighting a losing battle when he recalls with envy and admiration how fearlessly Naranappa had lived with Chandri in the heart of the *agrahara* and how Mahabalā, his fellow mate at Kashi had given up Sanskrit learning to
seek salvation through a whore. Pained by the fact that he had gone against his own ideals, he wonders in anguish, “Naranappa, did you go through this agony? Mahabala, did you go through it?” (132) Praneshacharya’s worst moment of crisis comes when while attending to his wife later, he feels “like a baby monkey losing hold of his grip on the mother’s body as she leaps from branch to branch” and wonders if he had clutched this dharma to protect his wife or “did the dharma, clinging to him through the action and culture of his past, guide him through these ways” (75).

Much earlier Praneshacharya is unconsciously affected by Naranappa’s mockery of his recitation of legends and erotic poetry which supposedly made the Brahmins sin more, to the extent of him giving it up for moral tales of penance. Despite requests to excommunicate Naranappa, Praneshacharya had refrained from doing so not because of Naranappa’s threat to turn Muslim which would have defiled the colony but because he believed he could transform him through compassion. Praneshacharya’s alter ego is the half caste Putta who sticks to him “like a sin of the past” (106) as he flees the agrahara. It is in Putta’s prattling that the Acharya realizes that his dilemma, his decision, his problem was not just his but the entire agrahara’s, which explained why he had to resort to the ancestors, the gurus, the gods and the fellowmen for the answer. In fact even if he had the decided to carry the body of Naranappa, it would have involved three others, whereas the moment with Chandri which seemed like a dream, had torn him out of that world. And now he felt he could free himself from it “only through a free deliberate wide-awake fully-willed act,” (109) for which he had to go to Kundapura – to Chandri. To Praneshacharya whose world is confined to the compassionate teachings of the Book, the world outside, complete with its ordinary pleasures as well as the demonic and cruel
world of cockfights, a world that was Chandri’s, is opened up by Putta, “a denizen of this world’, ‘riddle-master, expert bargainer, pimp without any samskara’(142). And, when he experiences “a stirring of fire in his chest” (123) at the sight of Padmavati, he feels moved to the next stage of soul from Bhagirathi’s, the altar of his sacrifice. Naranappa’s parting shot to “push those sickly wives of yours into the river… get hold of a fish-scented woman who can cook fish-soup and go to sleep in her arms. And if you don’t experience god when you wake up, my name isn’t Naranappa”(26) seems to be prophetic.

Despite the distractions, so troubled is he that he feels sitting down and eating with the Brahmins at the Melige temple while still in the mourning period for his dead wife, is “as heinous a sin as Naranappa catching temple-fish to destroy Brahmin ways” (128). The thought makes him muster enough courage to head back to the agrahara to admit the truth. Whether he will or not remains unclear, reflective perhaps of Ananthamurthy’s own ambivalent stand. As the novel ends without a definite answer what is suggested is a movement not a closure. Pranesacharya’s crisis is the moral and spiritual crisis of an individual who finds himself at crossroads, guilty of having trod on an amoral path. It is a crisis that every individual goes through at some point or other in life. Though the crisis in Samskara is that of an individual and a community, the same can be extended to religion or the nation. The world as it was then is faced today, not only by conflicting views on religions but by warring factions and warring nations that if not checked can have a disastrous impact on the world order.

While Praneshacharya leads a life of restraint, self control and denial, true to Lord Krishna’s words, “Do what’s to be done with no thought of fruit” (2), Naranappa is the licentious one, in the midst of an orthodox community. Considered a pain in life, even in
death, he taunts Praneshacharya, accusing him of making the Brahmins sin more with his erotic description of legendary goddesses, one of the victims being Shripati, Lakshmanacharya’s son-in-law. The news of his death is received more with fear and anxiety than with sorrow for “alive, Naranappa was an enemy; dead, a preventer of meals; as a corpse, a problem, a nuisance” (3). Naranappa is held responsible for not only sullying brahminhood but inciting Garuda’s son Shyama to run away and join the army.

To Naranappa, “salvation is as possible through intoxication as by self-discipline, through violation as through observance of the Law” (144).

Though detested by his community, he is looked up to as a friend, philosopher and guide by Shyama, Shripati and the rest of the drama troupe, for exposing them to the wonders of the outside world. Strangely, during his last moments as he slips into a coma, Naranappa cries out, “O mother! O God Ramachandra, Narayana!” (45), one of the names of Lord Vishnu, believed to have the power to redeem and protect. There is ironically a reversal of roles in Naranappa and Praneshacharya – the former seeking salvation for his amoral ways and the latter inwardly taking delight at having broken free from the shell which had held him captive. Through the portrayal of Naranappa is seen the notion of individualism and free will. Here is an individual questioning a system, whose rules have been defined. But who is responsible for defining them? Is culture the product of society or society, the product of culture? Is it proper to cling onto age-old traditions or should society being an evolving phenomenon, be ready to accept changes?

The “critical insider” that he is, Ananthmurthy, through Naranappa hits out at the strait-laced village Brahmins who attend to the “rituals” (samskaras) but are devoid of any “refinement of spirit” (samskara). Greedy, gluttonous and mean-spirited, they lust
after Naranappa’s forbidden pleasures, in betrayal of their own wives. They look up to the
Acharya for answers but when he whose *samskara* had hitherto consisted of Sanskrit
learning and ascetic practices, turning even his marriage into a penance by marrying an
invalid, had himself surrendered to the senses, what moral right did he have to judge
Naranappa or advise his followers? Naranappa seems to have Ananthamurthy’s support
in playing the devil’s advocate. As the Acharya is initiated into a *samskara* (*rite de
passage*), leading to the transformation of his self, questions such as ‘Who is a Brahmin,
how is he made?’ are raised. As Praneshacharya battles through “tradition and defiance,
asceticism and sensuality, the meaning and meaninglessness of ritual, dharma as nature
and law, desire (*kama*) and salvation (*moksha*), his mind is clouded with uncertainties.
What is right and what is wrong? Who decides it? True to an archetypal hero moving
through a *rite de passage* involving the three stages of ‘separation’, ‘transition’ and ‘re-
incorporation’, the Acharya goes away, undergoes a spiritual experience and comes back,
reinforced in mind.

As for the rest of the Brahmins, they simply voice out what they had been taught
through the ages. To them the crisis is the challenge to their faith and belief system.
When the question of Naranappa’s *samskara* comes up, Garudacharya, wonders if
Naranappa, is a Brahmin at all since he had slept regularly with a lowcaste woman, drank
and ate animal flesh. This he felt may not matter to the Smartas since Shankara, their
“great founder, in his hunger for full experience, exchanged his body for a dead king’s
and enjoyed himself with the queen” (6-7). Garudacharya’s echo of the Acharya’s words
that their Philosophy is called “Vedanta, because it’s the end, the anta, of all thinking”
(29) and that a man could be given even cow’s flesh if his life depended on it, is like the
Devil quoting the scriptures. Lakshmanacharya feels that Naranappa could be condoned for not attending to his own wife’s funeral, not observing the death anniversaries of his own parents and even for throwing the holy stone into the river but not for bringing Muslims over and feasting with them. Dasacharya who “lived entirely on the meals that Brahmins get at death-rites and anniversaries” (8), which he had been deprived of since two years because of Naranappa, just wants the whole business over. Durgabhatta, the only man from the Smarta sect in the colony of Madhva Brahmin is ready to expose the Madhvas should they get tempted by Chandri’s offer of the jewels and cremate Naranappa. He taunts Garuda about his son joining the army, declaring that he would now have no baths, no prayers and would be forced to eat meat. In the beginning, Durgabhatta is caught ogling at Chandri, drawing comparisons with “Matsyagandhi, the fisherwoman in the Ravi Varma print… shyly trying to hide her breasts bursting through her poor rag of a sari”(8), and remembering Jagannatha, the Brahmin poet who married the Muslim girl, and his verses about the alien’s breasts”(9).

Putta, Praneshacharya’s overzealous companion, is the antithesis of the Acharya. While Naranappa is painted as the anti-self of Praneshacharya, Putta is a breath of fresh air. Vivacious and chatty in character, Putta, a lover of human beings is best described in his own words, “O Putta? Our Putta: if you let him go, you’ll lose him; but find him, he’ll never leave you” (121). Like the riddle he poses to the Acharya, “one plays, one runs, one stands and stares”, he is the fish that plays and the water that runs while Praneshacharya is the stone that stands and stares in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the market place. Quite conscious that he is only half-Brahmin despite the sacred thread, Putta has no resentment whatsoever towards the community that will not allow him to partake in their
feasts. While Putta feels at home at the fair with the “noise of reed-pipes”, “the smells of burning camphor and joss-sticks”, “the smell of new clothes”, “the song of the balloon-seller”, “the peepshow” (113) and the cockfight, the same not only disgusts Praneshacharyya but terrifies him, making him realize that “one part of lust is tenderness, the other part a demoniac will” (117), the tenderness being the forest and the demonic will, being the village fair with its cruel cock fights. Putta represents a society which does not feel the burden of morals or virtues. What may be implied is that morals do not matter to the lowcastes. Putta who is contented with his lot, seems at home with all alike, be it the people at the fair, Padmavati or Praneshacharya. Shripati, the disciple of Naranappa is consumed with desire by the description of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala and seduces Belli by the riverside as she appeared like Shakuntala herself when “the rag on her body had slipped, and as she stood in the moonlight bouncing her breasts, the colour of earth” (39).

Women in *Samskara* are cast in stereotypical roles, as shriveled hags or bewitching temptresses. Chandri is the “seducing witch” (7), the “sharp” type as in Vatsyayana’s *Kama Sutra*, the manual of Love; compared to Ravi Varma’s Matsyagandhi, a fish- scented woman whose beauty enticed the wandering Sage Parashara to seduce her and bless her body with a musky fragrance. She is also compared to Urvashi, a celestial nymph in the God of Heaven, Indra’s court, who was cursed to live on earth and become the wife of King Pururavas. Set as a foil against the Brahmin women referred to as “stupid shaven widows”, who “before they bear two brats, their eyes sink, cheeks become hollow, breasts sag and fall”, Chandri is the “Perennial Tunga river that doesn’t dry up, doesn’t tire”(45). Despite being a prostitute she is “ever-auspicious, daily- wedded, the one without widow-hood”(44) a *nitya-sumangali*, the
reference being to the temple Devadasis, (implying that Chandri is the offspring of a Brahmin and a Devadasi); and is like the running water which cannot be defiled. Despite her feelings for Naranappa and her wish that he gets a decent Brahmin burial, Chandri secretly nurses the desire her mother had fed her with – that “prostitutes should get pregnant by such holy men” (46) which is apparently why she follows Praneshacharya into the forest. She bears no remorse whatsoever when Praneshacharya yields to her for she is “a natural in pleasure, unaccustomed to self-reproach” (68). The thought in fact “brought her only a sense of worthwhileness, like the fragrance of flowers hidden” (68).

When she returns to check on the corpse, she is horrified at the reeking body with the swollen belly and the grisly and disfigured face and hastens to get rid of “that thing” (69) “not her lover, Naranappa” anymore but “a carcass. A stinking rotting carcass” (70), with the help of Ahmad Bari, a Muslim. To Chandri, the crisis is nothing more than the disposal of a dead body who happened to be her lover.

Belli, who entices Shripati, Lakshmana’s son-in-law, is the one with a body “the colour of the earth, fertile ready for seed” (37), “always like ripe ears of corn bending before the falling rain” (40). She is Kalidasa’s Shakuntala when compared to his wife Lilavati who is “short, plump and round… wearing a dwarfish braid of hair” (31) and other Brahmin girls who had “cheek sunken, breast withered, and mouth stinking of lentil soup” (37). Praneshacharya’s wife, Bhagirathi herself is nothing but “a dried-up wasted pea-pod” (1) while Padmavati, with her “long hair, not yet oiled after a bath; plump fleshy thighs, buttocks, breasts. Tall, long limbed” (124) instantly draws Praneshacharya’s attention. Sitadevi, Garudacharya’s wife, Anasuya, Lakshmanacharya’s wife and the toothless woman are all but frigid women with
“dwarfish braids and withered bodies”(15). Why are the low caste women painted as voluptuous beside their high caste counterparts? Is their vulnerability the cause of their poor economic condition that relegates them to the periphery of life? Or can their unbridled spontaneity which makes them prey to the male fantasy be attributed to perhaps the fact that they have no morals or that morals do not matter to them as it does to the upper class? All of this seems plausible in “Samskara, as low caste and outcaste women like Chandri and Belli are hallowed and romanticized by references to classical heroines like Shakuntala and Menaka, the ‘temptresses of sages … who besides being classical… are earthly and amoral, ideals of untroubled sexuality” (144). As Mukherjee points out women in Samskara “are made to carry the allegorical burden while the male protagonist is invested with subjectivity and agency”. True enough the Acharya’s sick wife is an epitome of “the diseased sterility of the entire agrahara…while outside this enclosed world there is a celebration of life made more desirable by contrast” (87).

The central characters in Samskara show that individual perspectives of the notions of ethics and morality may differ depending on the dilemmas they find themselves in. Praneshacharya and Naranappa belong to the same community but while one seeks to stabilize the community with his preaching and practicing of the values, the other seeks to destabilize it through his amoral actions. Being grounded in the teachings of the Vedas, Praneshacharya feels that it is his duty to uphold all Brahminic values if he desired to attain moksha from this life. Believing his birth as a Brahmin to be a test in his pursuit of salvation, he takes an invalid for wife and leads a life of celibacy. Naranappa on the other hand attempts to prove him wrong by indulging in all that goes against the orthodox practices of the Brahmins. Praneshacharya’s merging with his opposite through
the latter’s mistress, is his initiation into reality which affirms that there are no absolutes in life.

4.3 POINT OF VIEW

Ananthamurthy in *Samskara* makes an attempt to examine two world views – a world whose “identity is determined by *karma* (the law of cause and effect) and *varna*” (caste system) against “a new awareness of self, partly conditioned by existential thinking” (Mukherjee 83). On one hand, Praneshcharya’s life and actions could be explained from Hume’s theory of causal determinism which claims that everything that happens has already been causally determined to occur and that the freedom to act otherwise is entirely compatible with one’s actions having all along been predetermined by causes outside one’s control. Thomas Pink asserts that the Acharya’s instinctive touch, “the outstretched hands touched the breasts - desire was born” (98) seems to be true to Hobbes’ theory of naturalism that human beings are merely a more complex form of animal whose actions are determined by his desires. Giving in to the innate desire, Praneshcharya, the great follower of the Vedanta Philosophy whose invalid wife had been, the “sacrificial altar for his sacrifice” and who had so far “not desired any of the beauty he’d read about in the classics” now “wanted for himself a share of all that” (76-77). Aware that he had lived a life of duplicity, he feels that “to relieve this misery, he must lose awareness again and embrace her, must wake up in that misery” (78). The strains of existential thinking are evident when he admits,

“In that moment, decisive of which way I should turn, the decision was taken to take Chandri. Even If I lost control, the responsibility to decide was still
Man’s decision is valid only because it’s possible to lose control, not because it’s easy. We shape ourselves through our choices, bring form and line to this thing we call our person. Naranappa became the person he chose to be. I chose to be something else and lived by it”(98).

_Samskara_ is not just a critique of decadent Hinduism but “a novel where the physical and the metaphysical fuse; where the interiority of an individual’s social predicament is dealt with in its psychological complexity; and where the problem reflects also the crisis of a civilization in which though a painful process a collective code is giving way to individual choice” Mukherjee(85).

Ananthamurthy also questions the decadent beliefs of the community through the half-wit Lakshmidevamma who was “married at eight, widowed at ten”and whose “mother-in-law and father-in-law had died when she was fifteen” and was sneered at “as the ill-starred girl” (42). Behind her tirade of the Brahmins for not cremating Naranappa’s corpse, “Where has your brahminism gone, you rascals! Don’t you know you’ll fall into the lowest hell reserved for outcasts and perish there?”(43) can be sensed the author’s voice.

In _Samskara_, Ananthamurthy brings together a microcosm of communities in South India, true to Mikhail Bakhtin’s dictum in _The Dialogic Imagination_ that “the novel must be a microcosm of heteroglossia.” (Raval 116) even though the primary concern of the novel is to portray a decadent Brahmin community. Beginning with the present, the novel operates in a flashback mode, going back to the early years the Acharya spent in Benares, the narratives of the different characters in the community and their bitter outlook towards life. Twice in his life, the protagonist finds himself in an
existential crisis – once in his youth when his classmate and friend gives up his religious studies in pursuit of hedonistic pleasures, the shock of which makes him opt for a very austere life denying himself the basic pleasures and the next because of the pleasure loving Naranappa, in whom he sees Mahabala and who continues to taunt him in death as in life. That Mahabala, the Smarta, to whom only the experience of God mattered, who had countered Praneshacharya’s argument,” Don’t you need a path to the experience of God? It’s through dualism of God and soul you reach him”, with “What do you mean path? Is God’s heaven a city or a village so you can find it on a road? One should reach it from where one stands” (99), should turn an apostate had been too much for the Acharya.

Though the crisis in Samskara seemingly arises out of the death of Naranappa and his cremation, the narrative gets structurally more complex with Naranappa’s relatives giving vent to their deep buried resentments. Refusing at first to undertake the funeral rites, they consent on seeing Chandri hand over her jewels to Praneshachary. Clouded as the novel is by personal and communal confusion over the disposal of the rotting corpse, Chandri’s gesture of giving up her jewelry to meet the expenses of her lover’s funeral rites and the swift disposal with the help of the loyal Muslim without any fanfare stands out starkly in contrast to the futile search for the answer in the scriptures and appeals to Lord Maruti. As the tension in the narrative mounts with Praneshacharya almost buckling under the pressure of the crisis, Ananthamurthy brings in Putta to offer not only a lightness to the story telling but also as a philosopher.

As if the influence of Naranappa over the young men in the community is not enough, the threat posed by Naranappa’s death to his authority doubles Praneshacharya’s woes. Commentatorsthough, see two serious flaws in Ananthmurthy’s protagonist – the
central dilemma regarding the death-rite should not be a dilemma to a learned Brahmin like the Acharya as the answer can be found in the Dharmasindhu and also according to the design of dharma which professes that desire (kama) and the goods of his world (artha) should be affirmed and celebrated, Praneshacharya should be the married householder and not lead the life of a celibate student, forest-dweller or ascetic renouncer as he seems to be leading (Ramanujan 145-6). Sharing Ramanujan’s view is S L Byrappa, a contemporary of U R Ananthamurthy, who thinksthat Indian novelists were unable to come out of the colonial syndrome of the image of man constructed by the colonialists. That, Praneshacharya, the Crest Jewel of Vedic Learning, who had studied for 12 years in Benares and who had chosen to lead a life of self denial should yield to carnal pleasures, is in his view, “not an Indian character struggling with problems of dharma but a European clergyman struggling with the Christian religious and moral problems”(56). Quoting the Dharmashastra which professes that “the purpose of marriage is the continuation of one’s Vamsha and the girl one marries should be capable of bearing healthy children and also be capable of giving sexual satisfaction to her husband, failing which, a man can marry again, provided he provides for the needs of the first too” (57), he wonders how Praneshacharya is ignorant of this.

In Ananthamurthy’s view “although Hinduism says that the fountainhead of creation is Ananda and the creation itself is an aspect of God, our society is ridden by caste-system, puritanical inhibitions, fear of experience and indifference to whatever remains outside our system”. His stand however ruffles the feathers of two opposing forces, those who see culture as rigid, a never changing one, and those who believe in the dynamic evolution within the contemporary Indian and global cultural contexts. A
question raised was whether human crisis was nationally and culturally conditioned. Invested with a somewhat mythical power by his community, Ananthamurthy like all the post independent writers tries to explore ways to handle this novel crisis. Although the protagonist fails to find a way out of the crisis, through it he seems to move away, from a rigid hold on his tradition and its seemingly decadent implications, to a greater consciousness about himself.

Explaining his stand, Ananthamurthy (interview with the researcher- 21/5/12) feels that the caste Brahmins are not aware of what is professed in the Manu Dharma Shastra according to which doing samskara to a body is not merely to burn it. The body has to go back to the panchabhoothas (the five elements, namely earth, fire, water, air and ether) from where it came, and since as human beings we cannot easily detach ourselves from the body, rituals are performed. For the dead person who has become a pretha (spirit of a dead person) to become a pithru (spirit of an ancestor), different parts of the body are invoked before chasing them out of the world saying, gachcha, gachcha preha (go away pretha, go away) after which two rice balls, one for the pretha and one for the pithru are made and then mixed and a bowl of water and some thread kept for the pretha which is believed to be hovering around. In Samskara, the novel, the Brahmins refuse to cremate the body, not because they do not want to, but because they do not want the body as a pithru. According to the Manu Shastra, if a Brahmin has flouted the norms of caste, he is to be excommunicated. But in the eventuality of Naranappa being excommunicated, there was his threat of becoming a Muslim which would lead to the agrahara, being polluted. As a critical insider, Ananthamurthy more than anyone else is aware of the ugly grip of caste as is evident in the novel when Chandri, repulsed at the
sight of the reeking body with the belly swollen and the face, grisly and disfigured, rushes out screaming to get the help of the shudra, Sheshappa to cremate the body to only be met with, “Chandravva, that can’t be done. Do you want me to go to hell, meddling with a Brahmin corpse? Even if you give me eight kinds of riches, I can’t” (69-70).

As for Praneshacharya submitting to the urge of desire, it is because prakrithi (nature) is greater than purusha (an individual). Praneshacharya willfully flouted the four stages of life, but in the close encounter with Chandri, it was prakrithi which had the upper hand. Just as the great sage Parashara’s submission to the desire of the fish-smelling Matsyagandhi, Praneshacharya, who could speak about Shakuntala without being stirred, so strong a will he has, finds himself overpowered by the natural instinct. So by living a life of self-denial, Praneshacharya was not being a hypocrite but simply a man of bad faith. Naranappa, his opponent also lived a life of will, by living life on his own terms.

Ananthamurthy’s works can be placed within the Navodaya and Navya movements in Kannada literature. While the Navodaya or Progressionist movement ushered in social change, challenging authoritarianism, the yoke of traditional authority and social realism, the Navya movement or the Modernists used the literary weapon to question and critique the age old tradition and beliefs of their own community with the purpose of ushering in change. In Samskara, Brahmanism is reduced to mere rituals and rites. Using the death of Naranappa as a catalyst, Ananthamurthy exposes the hypocrisy and double standards of the community. Alternating between the stream of consciousness, interior monologue and the self reflective mode, the narrative written mostly in the third person makes the reader experience the moral and ethical dilemma of
Praneshacharya as he sets out in his quest for the meaning of life. His journey takes an existential turn when religion fails him and he falls into an abyss of uncertainty, only to regain himself and get a hold upon his life. The physical journey that he undertakes corresponds to the journey of the mind, from a state of certainty to uncertainty and finally to self realization as he wanders in a different world which gives him an occasion to look within himself.

Allegory and realism go hand in hand as Samskara abounds in many a realistic detail with allegorical nuances. The village of Durvasapura with the Tunga river flowing by, is named after the angry sage Durvasa, the son of Atri and Anusya and an incarnation of Lord Shiva in Hindu mythology, known and revered by humans and gods alike because of his short temper. The other villages and cities named in the novel like Shivamogge, Basrur etc are real. As A.K. Ramanujan says, “the characters are frankly allegorical, but the setting is realistic. An abstract human theme is reincarnated in just enough particulars of a space, a time, a society”(144-45).

Samskara as Ananthamurthy himself had disclosed, was inspired by happenings in his agrahara which was struck by the plague when he was about thirteen years old. Having been witness to the deaths around him especially in the low caste locality where the orthodox doctor had not gone because they were considered untouchables, Ananthanmurthy felt strongly against these practices, influenced as he was by his father’s reading of Gandhi’s writing against untouchability. The thatched huts of the plague victims were burnt down amidst whispers that they were being punished by the Gods for having dared to enter temples in North India, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi’s teachings of a casteless society.
Ananthamurthy had also been impressed by an orthodox Brahmin who on his return from the army, had fed the youth with tales of far flung places and battles fought. The youngex-armyman’s secret romance with a beautiful girl from the untouchable quarter was another reason for Ananthamurthy to relook at the caste system. The character of Naranappa is modeled after the ex-army man and Chandri after the beautiful harijan girl who in the author’s eyes resembled the mythical fisherwoman, Mathsygandhi whose charm had held Parashara, the saint, spellbound.

The allegorical tone in the novel is seen right in the beginning in the contrast between the flowering trees in all the yards and those that “bloomed in Naranappa’s yard, reserved solely for Chandri’s hair and for a vase in the bedroom” and the flowers of the night – queen bush “invading the night like some raging lust, pouring forth its nocturnal fragrance” which made the agrahara writhe “in its hold as in the grip of a magic serpent-binding spell” (15). The appeal of lively abandon against the dictates of restraint expected of a binding order gets further reiterated in the description of Chandri who “wore her black-snake hair coiled in a knot and wore flowers of the ember-champak and the heady fragrant screw-pine” while “the auspicious Brahmin wives wore mandara and jasmine” (15). The snake and by transference the hair, braided or loose is said to have sexual connotations strong enough to throw the men out of their senses as it does Shripati when he sees Beli, “her hair washed in warm water, wearing only a piece below her waist, naked above, waves of hair pouring over her back and face” (40) and Praneshacharya when he sees Padmavati with “a black braid coming down her shoulder, over her breast” (123). While the serpent symbolizes female eroticism, the male lust is expressed through animals, with a constant reference to the tiger – “Naranappa had guzzled at her (Chandri)
body… tearing and devouring like a gluttonous bear at a honeycomb” or leaping “like a raging striped tiger”(45) just as the flowers of the night-queen bush in his garden invade the night “like some raging lust”(15). Praneshacharya recollecting his thoughts of Chandri remembers “his body’s tigerish lust” as the awakened “animal leapt to its natural self and bared its teeth” (81). In the Acharya seeking to gratify his displaced carnal urges is seen a failure to address his feelings.

The ominous sign of pestilence comes through the rats which according to Belli “come like relatives looking for a place to stay” and “fall pattering from the roof, run round and round, and die”(40). Not knowing it to be the plague, it is assumed that some kind of a strange fever had consumed Pilla and his wife. Soon after, Shripati comes across “a dead rat, dead on its back, its legs up in the air” (41)when he goes to Naranappa’a house in search of him.

The regeneration of the Acharya in the arms of Chandri who feels that she is offering her body in an act of compassion makes her, a mother figure whose prime duty is to comfort and protect her young one, as “he cried out like a child in distress, ‘Amma!’” and Chandri leaned him against her breasts, took the plantains out of her lap, peeled them and fed them to him” (64). As the Acharya feels the veil that had blurred his vision all these years dropping, all his senses are awakened to the beauty of the world he chose to disassociate from.

“Below were green smells, wet earth, the wild Visnukranti with its sky blue flowers and the country Saraparilla, and the smell of a woman’s body sweat. Darkness, sky, the tranquility of sanding trees… Chirping sounds …twinkling
lightning-bugs. He gazed, he listened till his eyes were filled with the sights, his ears with the sounds all around him, a formation of fireflies”(67).

The mother figure of Chandri is taken further as the Acharya feels that he has “fallen into his childhood, lying in his mother’s lap and finding rest there after great fatigue”(67). That is the moment when Praneshacharya, the Crest-Jewel of Vedic learning who had till then been the savior of the agrahara, doing his utmost to cleanse the sins of his people, is reborn in a new avatar. The sense of awakening arouses in him a sensory joy typical of a child as he finds pleasure in the cold water, the sun-warmed sand and the licking of the calf.

Samskara alternates between the narrative mode, direct speech and the stream of consciousness technique. The novel begins in the narrative mode telling the story of Praneshacharya and goes on to use the other modes. From multiple narrators the story is unraveled through a single narrator who swings between the past and the present through the stream of consciousness technique. As the Acharya goes through his troubles, the reader too experiences the turmoil he undergoes. The worldview of Ananthamurthy’s Samskara seems to be defined in socio cultural binaries. Following the Varna Dharma analogy of Brahmanic Hinduism, Samskara’s world is characterized by the hierarchical structure which attributes the head to the Brahman and the limbs to the shudra. Ironically in death, the hierarchical structure is evened out as Chandri screams out, “It is neither Brahmin nor shudra. A carcass. A stinking rotting carcass”(70).

The author’s ideology is voiced through Shankaracharya, the priest of Parijatapura who affirms that according to Brahmin thinking, “a snake is also twice born, if you happen to see a dead snake you’ve to perform the proper rites for it; you shouldn’t
eat till you’ve done so”(19). Although on the one hand, Samskara mocks at the decadent state of Brahmanism and its rigid hierarchical structure, on the other it reiterates the notion of a Brahman – centred village. True to upholding their traditional values, the lower castes are treated as “mere carcasses”. The patriarchal and hierarchical Brahmanic worldview is reflected in Praneshacharya, who despite undergoing a series of changes and transformations reiterates the worldview. The title Samskara which implies the “last rite” is the central theme of the novel but this last rite is meant for the man and the man in question here is the Brahman. As is evident, women and the outcastes who are denied equality and freedom of expression are not entitled to this privilege. Even though the Acharya is devoted to his bed – ridden wife, she is considered to pollute during her periods,”How can I touch a woman polluted by her menstrual blood?”(84).

Praneshacharya’s moral and spiritual crisis which leaves him in an indecisive state throws the whole social order in disarray as no one is willing to step out of the confines of the boundaries defined by the community. Meanwhile the plague strikes, threatening to become an epidemic, as lives are lost and huts are burnt down. While the question of moral concerns figure greatly in the discourse of the Brahmins, little thought is given to the social aspects which show all signs of having a disastrous effect not only on the social order but on health as well as the plague continues unabated, to claim its victims. Interestingly, the moral crisis and social order in Samskara is both confrontational and complementary. While Naranappa takes a confrontational stand, in defiance of all that Brahmanism stands for, the questions raised about the decadent values and practices and the need for change makes it complementary to an evolving society.
While confronting the historical realities of the age, Ananthamurthy also addresses the existential dilemmas and choices of the individuals. By questioning the so-called decadent practices of the community, the author actually initiates an important debate on the need for change. Equally critical of tradition and modernity, the author throws light on the existential dilemmas, contradictions, dualities and paradoxes that the modern age faces in this conflict between the two forces. Presenting the moral dilemmas of a community which finds itself in a social crisis within the context of a society in transition, Ananthamurthy, in Samskara, takes an ambivalent stand before life’s uncertainties.