

“Dharma, Desire, and Doubt: Ethical Dilemmas in U.R. Ananthamurthy’s Samskara”

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Abstract

U.R. Ananthamurthy (1932–2014), a towering figure in modern Indian literature, profoundly influenced the expressive landscape of Kannada and Indian writing through his seminal novel *Samskara*. As a pioneer of the *Navya* (modernist) movement, Ananthamurthy employed fiction not only as a medium for storytelling but as a vehicle to interrogate India's complex relationship with tradition, modernity, and morality. This paper explores the expressive dimensions of Indian language and culture as manifested in *Samskara*, highlighting how the Kannada language—rich with cultural idioms, philosophical concepts, and oral tradition—is used to dramatize ethical dilemmas rooted in caste, ritual, and personal identity. Through Praneshacharya's spiritual and existential crisis, *Samskara* becomes a literary site where metaphysical questions about dharma (duty), samskara (ritual and internal conditioning), and moksha (liberation) are brought into the realm of lived experience. The novel's narrative structure, deeply embedded in local speech rhythms and cultural registers, reflects the oral and symbolic traditions of Indian storytelling while also engaging with modernist narrative techniques. Ananthamurthy's broader intellectual and political life—including his role as a critic of religious orthodoxy and nationalist ideologies, and his active engagement in academia and cultural institutions—further contextualizes *Samskara* as a work of resistance and reform. This paper expands the central philosophical and moral tensions within U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*, a novel that interrogates the foundational aspects of Indian religious and social life.

Keywords: U.R. Ananthamurthy, *Samskara*, Kannada literature, Indian modernism, *Navya* movement, ritual and morality, dharma, expressive culture, caste, postcolonial India.

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I. Introduction:

Samskaras are the revolving points of life and need to be renowned. Celebrations are significant Samskaras components. Samskaras are wonderful, time-tested instruments that help to create a great personality in our obsolete systems. Ceremonies and costs are Samskaras. From the time it is weighed in the womb of the mother until his demise, Samskaras protects the whole existence of a Hindu from a broad range of funerals and then from his soul's straight passage to the world. The most divisive and popular book in U.R. Anantha Murthy, *Samskara*, is a novel about a declining colony in Brahmin. There are sixteen main sacraments: Pre-Natal Samskaras

1) Garbhadhana, 2) Punsavanam, 3) Simantonnayana

Post-Natal Samskaras:

1) Jatakarma, 2) Namakarana Samskara, 3) Niskramana Samskara, 4) Annaprashana Samskara, 5) Chudakarma, 6) Karnavedha, 7) Upanayana & Vedarambha, 8) Keshanta, 9) Samavartana, 10) Vivaha 11) Vanprastha, 12) Sanyas, 13) Antyeshthi

The subtitle of the novel suggests, the central event of *Samskara* is *A Rite for a Dead Man*, then we encounter a number of structural problems.

Philosophy and Ethical Dilemma in *Samskara*

U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* is not merely a critique of Brahmanical orthodoxy or a portrayal of caste-based social degradation—it is also a philosophical exploration of the ethical dilemmas posed by rigid religious dogma, social stagnation, and individual agency. The novel unearths the conflict between prescribed Dharma (religious duty) and lived experience, and places the protagonist Praneshacharya at the center of this philosophical and moral storm. The tensions between tradition and change, purity and pollution, spirituality and carnality, duty and desire, animate the novel's core.

Dharma and Samskara

In Hindu philosophy, *Dharma* is the moral law combined with spiritual discipline that guides one's life. *Samskara* refers both to ritual purification and the psychological imprints or conditioning left by past experiences. These two concepts frame the ethical challenges in the novel.

- **Dharma as a social code vs. inner morality:** The Brahmins of Durvasapura follow a scriptural and ritualistic Dharma, focusing on outward purity rather than inner ethics. Their inability to perform Naranappa's last rites is not due to moral objection, but fear of ritual contamination. This shows a loss of moral compass in the community, replaced by mechanistic rule-following.
- **Samskara as transformation:** Praneshacharya's journey reflects a deeper samskara—an internal shift. His experience with Chandri catalyzes self-reflection, shattering his false purity. In this sense, *Samskara* moves from being a ritual for a dead man to a personal spiritual awakening for the living.

The Ethical Dilemma of Praneshacharya

At the heart of the novel lies the existential dilemma of Praneshacharya, the spiritual leader and moral authority of the Agrahara. He is trapped between two irreconcilable roles: the upholder of traditional Dharma and a man torn by his own suppressed desires and doubts.

✚ When Praneshacharya engages in a moment of carnal passion with Chandri, he not only defies his ascetic vows but also becomes internally aware of the hypocrisy that taints Brahmanism itself. The irony is that this transgression gives him insight into human compassion and fallibility—qualities the orthodox religion lacks.

✚ His paralysis in making a decision about Naranappa's funeral rites highlights his loss of faith in the prescriptive nature of religious texts. His own fall from grace liberates him but also isolates him, leaving him morally adrift.

Critique of Scriptural Determinism

The novel severely critiques the notion that morality can be fixed in scriptural terms.

- **Vedas and Puranas as obsolete:** As Praneshacharya confesses, “God has become to me a collection of tables to be memorized.” The scriptures, which are supposed to guide, become sources of confusion when faced with a real ethical issue. They offer no living answers to human complexity.
- **Brahmanism as intellectual enslavement:** The Brahmins rely on texts they no longer understand, and their knowledge is performative rather than transformative. The novel suggests that true spirituality must move beyond dogma and embrace lived reality.

Asceticism vs. Eroticism: The Paradox of Desire

The tension between asceticism and sensuality is central to the narrative.

- **Shiva and the Sacred-Erotic:** The duality of Praneshacharya (ascetic) and Naranappa (hedonist) echoes the Shiva mythos, where the divine encompasses both destructive desire and spiritual transcendence. Praneshacharya's fall is thus not merely a personal sin but a philosophical encounter with a broader human truth—that denying desire entirely may result in spiritual sterility.
- **Sexuality as moral truth:** Ironically, Chandri—a lower-caste woman and a prostitute—is portrayed with more clarity, compassion, and ethical honesty than the Brahmin men. Her moral intuition—her act of arranging Naranappa's cremation—stands in contrast to the Brahmins' inaction. The ethical question raised is: who is truly moral? The one who follows rituals or the one who acts with empathy?

II. Conclusion:

U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* remains a landmark in Indian literature, a novel that engages deeply with the existential and ethical dilemmas inherent in the clash between tradition and modernity. Ananthamurthy, influenced by Western existentialist writers, creates a narrative that explores the internal crises of the protagonist, Praneshacharya, within the social, cultural, and religious constraints of his community. The novel's ethical ambiguity, particularly in its questioning of the rigidity of caste-based morality and the role of traditional rituals in modern life, challenges readers to confront difficult truths about the nature of ethics, purity, and human fallibility. Through Praneshacharya's spiritual and existential crisis, *Samskara* explores the possibility that moral integrity is not defined by ritual observance but by inner transformation and empathy. The novel suggests that true morality may arise not from blind adherence to tradition, but from self-reflection, the willingness to confront uncomfortable truths, and the courage to embrace change. By interrogating the role of religion, caste, and social roles in shaping ethical decisions, *Samskara* forces readers to consider whether tradition is a guide to ethical progress or a barrier to it.

Despite Ananthamurthy's later works like *Bharatipura* and *Bhava* not attaining the same level of literary acclaim as *Samskara*, the novel remains his magnum opus, continuing to resonate with readers long after the final page is turned. The philosophical underpinnings of *Samskara*, along with its portrayal of a man's journey of internal conflict, mirrors the complexities of contemporary Indian society, where modernity

constantly grapples with the weight of tradition. In this sense, Samskara transcends the limitations of its cultural context and becomes a universal meditation on the moral and existential questions that shape human existence. It is this ongoing dialogue with the reader, the unanswered questions, and the lack of definitive solutions that give Samskara its haunting power and solidifies Ananthamurthy’s place as one of the foremost voices in modern Indian literature. Thus, while Ananthamurthy’s legacy as a novelist may be complex and multifaceted, his contribution to the modern Kannada short story and his unparalleled exploration of existential themes in Samskara ensure his lasting influence on the literary world, both in India and abroad. Through his profound understanding of the intersection of personal identity, social structure, and moral questioning, Ananthamurthy continues to provoke and inspire, ensuring that Samskara remains a pivotal work in the canon of Indian literature.

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