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MISREPRESENTATION OF TRADITIONS AND MISINTERPRETATION OF
REALITY IN U.R. ANANTAMURTHY'S NOVEL 'SAMSKARA'

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Abstract: The Jnanapeetha awardee Dr. U. R. Ananthamurthy's novel *Samskara* was published in Kannada in the year 1966 which was made into a film in 1970 by the director and producer Pattabhirama Reddy and it was translated to English by A K Ramanujan in 1976. The paper proposes a critical re-reading of the novel since it created a controversy among the native readers regarding the misrepresentation of Indian traditions. R. Ananthamurthy had a great infatuation with the western world and thought process and that influenced him to write the novel *Samskara*. Since he fails to understand the core values of Indian traditions, his representation of traditions in the novel becomes problematic to the native as well as foreign readers. Without doubting its case for caste and gender, the paper attempts to explore the roots of misrepresentation of Hindu traditions and tries to argue that the novel offers a western conception of life which is the root cause of misrepresentation. V S Naipaul's objectionable comments on the Indian

civilization in his celebrated book *India: A Wounded Civilization* is an outsider's observation based on the narrow representation of an insider. This misrepresentation of Hinduism besides exporting a narrow image of India to the west also destroys the moral health of the society in India.

Keywords: Tradition, Hinduism, Scripture, Misrepresentation, Death rite.

Introduction:

In the year 1965 when Dr. U.R. Ananthamurthy was in England, he watched a movie by Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman titled *Seventh Seal*. In that movie, a Christian character faces a kind of spiritual crisis, which strongly influences Ananthamurthy and thus it becomes a very profound reason to write *Samskara* in Kannada. Ananthamurthy wrote *Samskara* with the intention of

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reviewing the age old rituals, virtues and sensitive matters of Hindu traditions with a critical perspective. Anantamurthy's least comprehension of Hinduism made the novel fail in its attempt of evaluating Hinduism as a 'religion'. This paper aims to raise some basic questions over author's comprehension of Hinduism and tries to explore the roots of the misrepresentation of tradition and argues that the novel offers a western conception of life which is the root cause of misrepresentation.

A Quick Plot Summary of *Samskara*:

Praneshacharya, the protagonist of the novel, well versed in Hindu scriptures and traditions at Durvasapura Agrahara, as portrayed by the novelist, struggles to find a solution to the question whether or not to perform funeral rites (Samskara) to dead Naranappa who was an outcaste Brahmin with vengeance against the tradition during his lifetime. Praneshacharya goes through all the scriptures including the *Manusmriti* for the answer but in vain. As he fails to fetch the answer for this question, he gets disillusioned about the tradition and decides to abandon the tradition and start a new life afresh disappearing from Durvasapura Agrahara.

Misrepresentations and Misinterpretations:

The novel *Samskara* begins with the death of Naranappa. By keeping the question of the funeral rites of Naranappa's

dead body unresolved for many days, author deliberately tries to conclude that Durvasapura Agrahara is stinking by its age-old religious customs and rituals. The novel, without even making a minute reference to the possible past glories of the tradition, even without providing any hint of virtues the society might have had before, straight away offers a caricature of the Agrahara as if it is uncivilized and quivering with its weaknesses. The character of Praneshacharya has been sketched as an embodiment of Hinduism with the supreme knowledge of Holy Scriptures and rituals. But during the death of Naranappa, the character behaves in a very peculiar manner for a real scholar of Vedic scriptures.

It feels that the author is trying to impose his ideas and biases into the character of Praneshacharya to make him look disillusioned of Hindu traditions. Praneshacharya's inability to find answer to the question whether the tradition allows to perform funeral rites to a demised corrupt Brahmin or not; symbolizes Hinduism as a tradition/culture which is born and brought up in midst of dichotomy and suffering with everlasting dilemma. This kind of misrepresentation of Hinduism has impacted very negatively on foreign readers while understanding Indian traditions through this novel. For instance V.S Naipaul in his work *India: A Wounded Civilization* states, "Knowingly or unknowingly, Anantamurthy has portrayed a barbaric civilization, where

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books, the laws are buttressed by magic and where a too elaborate social organization is quickened by intellect or creativity or ideas of moral responsibility (except to the self in its climb to salvation). These people are helpless, disadvantaged, easily unbalanced; the civilization they have inherited has long gone sour, living instinctive lives crippled by rules... they make up a society without a head". Moreover it could evoke a feeling of disgust in the native (Indian) readers for its unreal and unnatural description of Hinduism.

The first testimony to show how Hinduism is seen as a religion lying in everlasting dilemma is the very question raised regarding the death rites of Naranappa in the novel. Portraying a common question of death rites to a corrupted Brahmin as an unanswerable challenge to religious scholars and thereby projecting that it would shake the very roots of Hinduism seems to be a very trivial effort on the part of the novelist. In order to find out a solution for this question, Praneshacharya searches through all the Holy Scriptures, especially *Manu Smriti*, but in vain. Thus, the author makes an attempt to prove that Hinduism doesn't carry any answer to the question of performing funeral ceremony of a corrupt Brahmin. But the real question arises here on the scholarship of Praneshacharya. Hadn't Praneshacharya, who is portrayed as a great scholar (*Vedanta Shikhamani*) of Hinduism, read the basic

work of Hinduism the *Ramayana*? In the Yuddakanda of *Ramayana*, after the killing of Ravana; Vibhishana, the brother of Ravana, refuses to cremate Ravana, because even though Ravanawas born as a Brahmin, by his malignity, he had become a Rakshasa (demon).

At that moment Rama utters a hymn that translates as follows: "Hatred on any person remains until his death, with the death enmity also dies". And further, Rama tells Vibhishana that if he refuses performing the last rites to Ravana, then Rama himself will perform them. How is it possible for Anantamurthy to portray the character of Praneshacharya, a highly established representative of the Sanatana Dharma, being ignorant of *Ramayana*? Even though Naranappa was not excommunicated from Brahminism, why is it that the death rites exist as an irresolvable problem for Praneshacharya?

In my opinion, Anantamurthy has stumbled while stepping to criticize Hindu traditions through his work *Samskara*, because he has almost failed to understand the very concept of 'Dharma'. He has treated Hinduism as just a bookish or scripture-based religion. Moreover, he believes *Manusmrithi* as the ultimate holy book for Hindus. When the death rite of Naranappa became a problem, immediately Praneshacharya goes to consult *Manusmruthi*. When he doesn't find an

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answer, he becomes absolutely thoughtless. Through this, the author is deliberately trying to establish that in Hindu traditions there is no opportunity for an individual to think beyond the scriptures and man is compelled under the order of scriptures thus Hinduism is narrow and limited to scriptures. But in reality, Hindu traditions don't tell people to blindly follow what the scriptures say. In the *Bhagavadgeetha*, Krishna tells Arjuna in the end, "I have offered you the most secret and valuable knowledge, but I am leaving you to think and act". A person with knowledge will not stick on to the books, rather uses his wisdom. The *Manusmrithi* is one among the several smrithi and it was never depicted as a major or the most consulted text among them. The author has exaggerated *Manusmrithi* as an ultimate text in Hinduism just like the *Bible* and the *Quran* for Christians and Muslims respectively. This is a clear political strategy and ugly legacy of the British masters reused by the novelist to limit Hindu traditions to the dictums of the *Manusmrithi*.

Is the act of Praneshacharya motivated by the tradition or scriptures or by his own mental biases or weaknesses? Though the character of Praneshacharya is portrayed as highly 'religious' one, his choice in life seems quite irreligious. Even though he is a physically and mentally able man, he marries a crippled lady. Though he practices Gruhastashrama (married life), he doesn't render justice to it; rather he lives

like a celibate or monk. Here Anantamurthy tries to argue that Hinduism has created such an ambience wherein celibacy and sainthood are respected and emphasized more than a householder's life. But even in Praneshacharya's 'favorite' holy text *Manusmrithi*, Manu upholds the householder's (Grihasta) responsibility as a higher duty. He opines that for all the sources of water, Ocean is the centre, thus a householder is the backbone of society. Praneshacharya's acquainted poet Kalidasa, in his 5th 'Sarga' of the *Raghuvamsha* upholds a householder (married man) by saying that the status of a Grihasta is exemplary'. In P.V Kane's *History of Dharmasastra*, he points out the words of *Dharmasastra* which opine that only the householder (married man) has the authority to own property, celibates and monks have no property rights. All these things show how Hinduism upheld the importance of a householder's status. Having known all these, why did Praneshacharya choose a life which was neither of a celibate/monk nor of a householder?

In his essay, "How I Wrote *Samskara*" Dr. U. R. Anantamurthy writes an incident which took place in his youthful days. In his village there was a stone laid under a tree which was worshipped by the villagers. One day Anantamurthy urinated on that stone to make out whether really the stone had divine powers or it was a superstitious belief of the

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villagers. He writes that nothing had happened to him after urinating on the idol. For me, this event appears to be Anantamurthy's inability to make out the basic idea behind worshipping stones under trees. The very philosophy of Hinduism is this that it considers each and every moving and non-moving thing has a life force in it, bowing down to it propagates the very concept of nature worship. Without understanding it, he urinated over the stone. In the same way, by merely looking at some rituals of Hinduism and without making any effort to understand the essence of Dharma, the author has tried to depict what Hinduism is and thus he attempts to criticize Hindu traditions through *Samskara*. About his lack of knowledge on Hindu traditions and Indian heritage, he himself spoke once: "I have great dissent on myself of having very little knowledge on Indian heritage. My occupation and my lifestyle didn't allow me to read thoroughly on which I had heard in childhood. Many English books have come in the way of my reading *Ramayana*, *Mahabharatha*, *Bhruhatkatha*, Upanishads, *Bhagavadgeeta* and etc." (my translation from Kannada). This statement itself says that Anantamurthy didn't have a firsthand knowledge in Hinduism. Moreover, while writing *Samskara*, he was studying in England and was profusely influenced by western thoughts and ideologies, which might have been the reason behind the misinterpretation of reality.

Anantamurthy understood and presented Hinduism by the root models of western thoughts. He applied the western idea of 'religion' straight into Indian values and traditions. Thus he feels there is no liberal space for individualism and sex in Hinduism. So he makes Praneshacharya leave his roots and Brahminism for the adoption of a new life. It is depicted as a kind of liberation from the clutches of religion. This idea resembles the movement held in Europe with the emergence of science, when it was found that Christianity is against reasoning many skeptical people left Christianity. In the same way, Praneshacharya comes out from his beliefs in search of a new life. But this concept doesn't go with the Indian society because Hinduism has been opening up to several surgeries from time immemorial. Here in this society, there are vast opportunities to add, delete and change. The decision of leaving Brahminism or tradition as it was done in Europe with Christianity is the solution proposed by the author. But we can't agree with the author as we have seen the author being failed to recognize the root cause of the problem. The problem highlighted by the author arose because of the fault in protagonist's character and it has nothing to do with traditions. Hence, the issue that bothers the novelist here is very much individualistic rather than societal or religious in nature. Therefore, we can't conclude that abandoning traditions would

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resolve the problems. Understanding ‘Dharma’ as it is would be a better solution.

Conclusion:

In the novel *Samskara*, Anantamurthy tries to impose the individual frailties of Praneshacharya as the shortcomings of Hinduism. Failing in solving the question of death rite of Naranappa is the individual failure of Praneshacharya and not the weakness of the tradition. One needs to question Praneshacharya’s comprehension of tradition and not the essence of tradition. Instead of forsaking the tradition, it would be more relevant to comprehend it properly and make necessary corrections within if necessary. My argument is this that the representation of Hinduism is not objectively taken up in the novel. In the novel *Things Fall Apart*, the writer Chinua Achebe while tracking the decadence of his community doesn’t forget to show the past glory and beauty of that community. But from the beginning of *Samskara*, Hinduism is propagated as a falling culture and there is no hint of its good side. If the criticism of Hinduism was done without prejudices, it would have given an actual comprehension of Hinduism to the foreign readers and also this novel would have been an eye opener to the native readers. In his book *U.R Anantamurthy: Vaicharikate Hagu Sahithya*, G.S Amur Opines “It is my firm opinion that because of the conflict of reasons and the distortion of reality, partial and subjective comprehension and

strangeness of ideals and abstractness, even if it is a brilliant writing *Samskara* fails as a novel” (my translation). Though *Samskara* intends to review and revise Hinduism, it depicts Hindu traditions by standing far away from reality. Hence, the author fails to have an authoritative knowledge of Hindu traditions and thus the novel fails to criticize Hinduism with objectivity.

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