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Food, Ritual, and Caste: Culinary Regulation and Subject Formation in *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*

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Abstract: *The paper critiques Brahmanical rigidity and the orthodox social practices. The narrative traces a line of continuity between older Brahmin concepts of purity–pollution regimes and their persistence in the modern India by examining the diet of caste-based Indian society as a living archive of medieval caste food regulations. Since the ancient times the land is significant for the variety of culture and traditional practices, and these variations are very much reflected in the different cuisines of dishes’ which are a part of the various ethnic communities across the subcontinent.*

Although, Indian cuisine is known for its vegetarian diet, where the plant-based ingredients and dairy products are the main ingredients. It is the enhancement of the flavor through the use of spices and cooking methods that makes the Indian culinary practice favored all around the world. But apart from these vegetarian diets the country is also famous its non-vegetarian cuisines. And when it comes to consuming the non-vegetarian cuisines, a different perspective emerges on the notion of hierarchy that is, brought up based on the caste of the individuals in the nation.

*In this paper, the text of U.R. Ananthamurthy, *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man*, is analyzed to understand how food is used as a religious tool to demonstrate “pollution” and “purity” to maintain the caste hierarchy and power among the society by the upper class.*

Furthermore, the paper also focuses on ritualistic observance and the subsequent collapse of the ethical standards, through the transition of strict devotion and ascetic practices into fragmented beliefs, which marks the dissolution of rigorous practice of religious law.

Thus, the paper explores textual references to highlight how the ancient food philosophy had shaped the Indian food traditions within the society through the lenses of power, belonging and fear.

Keywords: *Food, ritual, caste, tradition, society, hierarchy*

Introduction

The novel *Samskara* is a portrayal of rigid Brahminical society of South India during the 20th century, where the modern innovations are still surrounded by strict religious beliefs and practices. The novel is a conflict between practicing the religious duties and the universal reality of humanity. Since, the ancient times India had the structure of social hierarchy. This system is based on the “Varna System” which was built depending on an individual’s caste.

The Brahmins were considered as the predominant community in this system, followed by the Kshatriyas that included the warrior class and below them were Vaishyas and at the



bottom were the Shudras. But there are certain communities who were not included within the varna system, and those communities were considered to be “Avarna”. These sections of communities were considered as the “untouchables” who belonged to the Dalit communities or other religious backgrounds.

The novel is centered on two characters, Praneshacharya, the head of the brahmin community in the agrahara, named as Durvasapura, who is referred to as the “Crest-Jewel of Vedic Learning”, due to his expertise in Vedic scriptures which he had acquired in Kashi. He is an individual of strict discipline leading an ascetic life, and without his command the community is unable to take any action in matters of religious norms or other situations. In contrast, Naranappa, a Brahmin by birth, who lived in the same agrahara is known for his rebellious nature. He had challenged the brahminhood by breaking all the rules that the community has to follow, one of that was consumption of non-vegetarian meals and second was living with his lover Chandri, who was Naranappa’s concubine belonging from the lower caste after living his first Brahmin wife.

The opening of the novel takes place with the death of Naranappa, and even after living with Chandri for a decade they did not have any heir of their own or nor did he had any children from his first wife. In Hindu custom, a person’s last rites are being carried out by their family, typically the elder son, but in the store as Naranappa had no children of his own and because the Brahmin community had a conflicting relation with him along with the controversies that were connected to him, the last rites of Naranappa was delayed. This whole predicament created a major deadlock, as the Brahmins had put a hold on the performing of the last rites of a man who had threatened the rules of his own community and waited until Praneshacharya had provided them with a solution from his knowledge from the scriptures. During this period, as the body of Naranappa was still yet to be cremated according to the custom, the whole agrahara had to fast and refrain from consuming food and water. The fasting during the mourning period is practiced as a form of spiritual cleansing and is a part of mourning etiquette. The novel unveils the consumption of food as a part of metaphysical order, social control and ritual practice.

This study has been conducted to demonstrate, that in, *Samskara*, “food” is a lens through which all the other conflicts have been made tangible and provides a medium of critique on the social orders that have denied the fundamental humanity of the body and its desire.

Caste and Ritual in *Samskara*

The Brahmin community living in the agrahara followed the strict religious customs, where every practice related to one’s lifestyle is done by following the religious scriptures. Through, these orders they had maintained their status and purity, particularly in terms of food and moral conduct. As per the Hindu scriptures, for the Brahmin communities, it was mandatory to follow strict dietary restrictions, that includes avoiding of meat, alcohol, certain vegetables such as, garlic, onion, etcetera, and anything touched by the lower caste communities. Also death is a period, considered as religiously impure which requires the performing of purification rituals such as, *antyeshti* and *shraddha* and only the personal relatives of the deceased can perform these rituals.

Although, abiding by these strict rituals is what defines the status of the Brahman communities. The novel, on the other has unveiled the disruption in order, especially in Naranappa’s death, where dharma of life is forgotten. Though, Praneshacharya had self-sacrificed himself from all the worldly matters of life, which included his willingness is



marrying his ailing wife Bhagirathi in order to pursue salvation, this ironically could be considered as self-centered way of life. “He had thought he should renounce the world, become a *sanyasi*, live a life of self-sacrifice. That was the ideal, the challenge, of his boyhood days. So, he had married a born invalid deliberately.” (Ananthamurthy, 1965, 66)

In the novel, Naranappa had explicitly objected to the caste norms and religious beliefs and practices by violating every rule in the law of religion, where he had threatened his community members of converting his religion to Muslim. Although, Praneshacharya had displayed the height of his discipline, the death of Naranappa had left him in a state of moral dilemma that even his mastery of spiritual accomplishments is not able solve the issue. This struggle reflects the broader complexity of an individual’s identity, which often is built as per the societal requirements; this can be connected with A.K. Ramanujan’s idea of the Indian way of thinking, where one might argue that “to learn about the Indian way of thinking, do not ask your moder-day citified Indians, go to the pundits, the vaidyas, the old texts.” (Ramanujan, 1989, 41). But in Praneshacharya’s situation the “old text” failed to offer the answer to his crisis and ultimately, the force of life lead Praneshacharya to experience the ultimate breakdown of his life, which forces him to confront the desires of human life that he had once vehemently suppressed.

These were presented through the intimate moment between Praneshacharya and Chandri in the woods and, also his desire for Belli, who another low caste woman treated as an object of use by the society and, including his presences in the temple during the mourning period of his wife’s death where he sat for the sacred temple meal in Melige. The other Brahmins present in agrahara had similarly given themselves to the fulfillment of their desires, that is, either for the lust of gold or hunger in quiet manner. This highlights the internal conflict between the spiritual law and human desires and how the traditions of religious norms are tested through the vulnerabilities of human beings.

Food as a Marker of Caste Hierarchy

In the novel, food is part of the symbolic system rather than being a sustenance for life. This indicates that food is a factor, which plays an important part in the societal ranking, moral conduct and ritual practices. Every meal is a performance of identity, a daily reaffirmation of one’s place in the cosmic order. Through the consumption of certain ingredients, the characters in the novel gives the judgment of their morality. The ideal Brahmin life is one dedicated to cultivating *sattva*, which is believed to be a spiritual clarity. This is achieved primarily through the Sattvic food diet, which includes food items which are obtained without inflicting any sort of violence. Such food habits are believed to maintain the calmness of human mind and purify the body.

Praneshacharya, the head Brahman and the protagonist and the other Brahmins present in the community had the special pure vegetarian (*vishesh shuddha shakahari*) diet, and they lived on the alms received from upper caste households. Even though there were animals and fishes present in the agrahara, the Brahmins were strictly opposed to the consumption of these creatures. In fact, they believed that the fishes present in the temple-pond which were dedicated to Lord Ganesha, if harmed, the individual who had committed the sin, would eventually, vomit blood and die. On the contrary, Naranappa, being a headstrong individual that went against the religious dogma, had caught the fish together with his muslim friends. For a Brahmin, whose entire social identity is based on their spiritual knowledge and abides by the law book, Naranappa’s consumption of meat and other forbidden ingredients is a form of annihilation of the rigid laws of ritualistic practices. This reaction aligns with Mary Douglas’s observation that



“pollution dangers strike when form has been attacked” (Douglas, 1966, 6) and when Naranappa had consumed the forbidden items in his Brahmin community, he did not just change his diet but it was also a form of attack to the formal power of the agrahara. He was constantly under the influence of alcohol and all his meals were prepared by Chandri and, these acts of him are direct attack to the Brahmin identity. Naranappa had managed to influence several other individuals from the Brahman community who had given up on their roles that were demanded according to the system and worked on their interest and followed the dietary patterns based on desires.

According to the rules of orthodox Brahmin practices, a Brahmin can only accept food that has been prepared by another Brahmin in a state of purity. These rules are everyday enforcements of the caste boundaries. Even among the Brahmin community, there are hierchies “Parijatapura’s Brahmins were Smartas, not quite out of the upper set, their lines being a little mixed” (Ananthamurthy, 1965, 13). This indicates that an upper rank Brahmin clan may not accept food from a lower rank Brahmin clan, “Durgabhata had a soft spot for the whole clan; furthermore, he was a Smarta himself. He had secretly eaten their flat-rice and *uppittu* and drunk their coffee. He was not brazen enough to eat a whole meal with them, that’s all.” (Ananthamurthy, 1965, 13). The discrimination towards the lower caste was not just directed to the communities who were placed out of the Varna system; rather it was directed to anyone who fell lower in the ranking system.

Ritual Crisis and Ethical Conflict

In the novel, the central crisis is on the performing of Naranappa’s funeral rites. As a Brahman who had deliberately broke the moral code of his religious norms, especially by consuming the non-vegetarian food and living with an individual from lower-caste, this exposes the fragility of the rigid system and lack of logic.

The situation after Naranappa’s demise forced even the most learned man in the village, Praneshacharya question his own ethics and beliefs. The novel examines the mechanism of social control and spiritual discipline that the orthodox system mediates through dietary codes. As Naranappa lived his life by challenging his own community and did many controversial activities so as to convincing the other children of the Brahman community to follow their desires and not go by the rule book. This is one of reason for the personal resentments and why the cremation process was delayed. This resentment stems from the fact that the Hindu society, as Ambedkar argued, was “Brahmin priestly class had used religious authority to monopolize knowledge, maintain control over rituals, and enforce caste distinctions.”(Sravanthi, Vamseedhar, 2024,79), and by breaking the dietary and intimacy codes, Naranappa did not just broke a rule, but he also threatened the ideological backbone of the Brahmin authority; which resulted as failure in the advancement of his last rites as, the community of the agrahara were unable to reach an agreement.

Also, Praneshacharya’s immense sense of knowledge regarding the *shastras* failed to offer any clear directive for the situation that the community was going through, and this, failure of textual authority is one of the cracks in the acharya’s world.

Pranashacharya himself had mentioned to his disciples about the dharma, the rule for emergencies, “Haven’t you yourself said, there’s such a thing as dharma, rule for emergencies?” (Ananthamurthy,1965,27), as one of the Brahman named Garuda pointed out and further informed about how during a famine, Sage Vishvamitra had consumed dog-meat because of unbearable hunger, as the supreme dharma is to saving of the life. “What do you say- a story you told us once – Sage Vishwamitra, when earth was famine-stricken, found



hunger unbearable, and ate dog-meat, because supreme dharma is the saving of a life?" (Ananthamurthy, 1965, 27)

This indicates the dilemma between two ways of thinking whether, to go by the book way or the human way suggesting the powerlessness when strike by the reality of the world. The act with Chandri is a moment of total collapse of his old self, the one that he had decided for salvation. His new experience of the practical world, where he had moved to his once suppressed desire is him surrendering and that is both terrifying and liberating.

Food, Desire and Subjectivity

The Brahmin Community in the Agrahara, treated food as part of their ritualistic order and not as means of sustenance. As noted, there were strict regulations on the dietary habits and the preparation of food and, various religious text such as, *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, classified food into three categories that is, *Satavik*, *Rajashik* and *Tamashik*. These three food categories are strictly caste based and according to the several religious texts, it is mentioned that one's behavior is determined by the food they had consumed (Sangle, Hodlur, 2025, 356-357).

Praneshacharya, whose identity is deeply rooted in purity and denying himself from worldly matter as a form of self-abnegation, which is shown through the deep entanglement in his food habits as well. His identity as a Brahmin scholar is gained from rigorous practice of self-construction that involved constant monitoring of his daily lifelong duties and actions. In these maintained regulations, the human desires such as, food prepared with lots of passion, pleasure, comforts in life are considered as obstacles in life. This rigidity of ritualistic practices highlight how caste systems does not merely functions as social ranks, but are also connected to deep rooted psychological frameworks. As noted, the caste systems operate as a social-psychological construction which is internalized into the social hierarchy and in every individual's sense of identity (Pall,2024,122). So, consequently, when Praneshacharya violets the norms and his own past ideologies, it is not just a loss of social balance but also the total collapse of psychology. However, his encounter with Chandri, is considered as the emergence of his desiring self and the conflict in his nature marks the moment of disintegration of ritual subjectivity. As he violets the norms of his ethical selfhood, there is an existential crisis he goes through and it is observed that all his later decisions were made in haste and every moment of relief were only for a minimal moment. This reveals how the food practices are deeply woven into moral consciousness. After his moments with Chandri, the acharya began to realize about the desires that he had once suppressed in order to pursue salvation.

The man, who had once pointed on Naranappa's actions, now finds himself on the same path that marks the departure from tradition and moral doctrine. By submitting himself to once long suppressed human impulses, Praneshacharya's the boundary between "purity" and "sin" is far more blurred than what he had once believed about the rigid system. Along with the journey to the new path of life which is filled with a lot of reluctance and hesitation, Praneshacharya's new identity can be considered as positive but is also very unstable, because he is still in the state of uncertainty and loss.

The ambiguous ending of the story, is the crucial part as it does not provide the proper resolution of returning to past self or accepting the change.

Critique of Orthodox Religious Practices

Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*, provides a powerful critique of the orthodox religious practices which are entangled with caste and ritual purity. Along with the depictions of community crisis, the novel dissects the very mechanisms of maintenance of power by the



upper class. From the Gastropolitical state which is introduced by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, where the role of food and their functions in society is studied. In his essay, “gastropolitics in Hindu South Asia”, it is explained that food is never only about providing one with nourishments’, but a powerful tool of shaping the social status, politics and religion. It explains about the politics involved in transactions of food, where the identity of the individuals involved matters the most. “Whenever food is exchanged in one domain, it carries some of the meanings of its roles into the domains.” (Appadurai, 1981, 509)

The agrahara of Durvasapura, is a site of internalized system where laws are not enforced by the social institutions or through any legal codes. The community’s power is in the control of the flows of purity and pollution such as, the control of dietary habits and the food flow. And, Naranappa’s rebellion against his own community is a direct attack from the gastropolitical order, as he chose to consume meat and other forbidden items as per the Satvic dietary law. This indicates that, food functions as a tool of sociocultural construction that defines the boundary of belonging and the hierarchies of power within a community (Sreelakshmi, 2023, 242). As a result, his house had become a space where the rules of agrahara were challenged.

Even though the community had attempt to isolate Naranappa because of his rebellious nature, still the community had not been able to ostracize him completely and during his death the whole agrahara had to fast as per the ritual. “No one ever excommunicated him officially. He didn’t die an outcaste; so he remains Brahmin in his death.” (Ananthamurthy,1965,10)

Yet, the community had delayed the cremation process because of the other Brahmins grudge towards him and his way of life. “I hesitate because you’ve all seen the way he lived.” (Ananthamurthy,1965,10). This displays the failure of the system in containing the management of all forms of life and death.

Followed by the plague, that hits the agrahara and also the cause of death for many other Brahmins of the agrahara including Naranappa’s demise. The diseases that are contained to biological phenomenon are connected to social conditions as well. This signifies the breakdown of proper order in matters and is a sign of the purity that was once flowing are being disrupted and that pollution which was feared is spread out in unchecked manner. The whole agrahara is paralyzed in the face of a corpse and that is the confession of their, own impotence.

Praneshacharya’s journey from the world that was once guided by the law of religion to his, personal explorations of the world that he had once considered as obstacles, teaches him that the world outside the agrahara does not operate according to the same rigid rules. His meal in the temple, where Putta who accompanied the acharya on his journey and convinced him to have his meal in the temple “You go in and eat your temple dinner” (Ananthamurthy,1965,109), and his consumption of beverages in restaurant (Ananthamurthy,1965,99). This shows, that everyone has to enter the practical world of reality, where every individual does not matter from which background, has to get involved with one another as a part of the society.

The acharya after being emotionally drained and being trapped in the crisis of his existence had found comfort by sleeping and accepting food from Chandri. Chandri, Naranappa’s concubine, whom, the Brahmin community of the agrahara had once, looked down upon, as she had belonged to lower caste community. This asserts that the connection that is based on mutual needs and desires is more fundamental than a connection based on birth and ritual status.

Conclusion



The article effectively illustrates how food in Ananthamurthy's book is a crucial epistemological and ethical axis via which caste, power, and subjectivity are created and challenged rather than a minor cultural element. One of the most personal tools of Brahminical control is culinary restriction, which naturalizes hierarchy under the pretense of ceremonial purity while disciplining bodies, desires, and moral consciousness. The novel reveals, and this article sharply highlights, that caste persists not only through overt exclusion but also via routine behaviors like eating, fasting, accepting, or refusing food—acts that subtly turn ideology into habit.

Through the lens of food consumption, the novel exposes the fragility of the social orders that prioritizes the laws of rituals practices over humanity, which is the *dharma* of life. Food in *Samskara*, functions as both the metaphor and material reality of life, that even though it is the most important part of any living being in the world, still it is considered as polluted when someone outside of build order touch.

Tracing how the crisis surrounding Naranappa's death reveals the hollowness of ceremonial absolutism is the paper's interpretive strength. The agraphara's immobility in front of a rotting corpse is representative of a moral hierarchy that puts textual compliance ahead of moral accountability. Here, food becomes the most glaring example of dharma's failure: fasting no longer purifies, abstinence no longer denotes virtue, and dietary regulations crumble under the weight of hunger, desire, and terror. The article makes a strong case that ritual subjectivity, which is created by denying the body, is inherently unstable when faced with lived reality through Praneshacharya's disintegration.

The study places *Samskara* inside a larger conceptual framework that reveals how caste operates as a system of embodied knowledge by combining Mary Douglas's theory of pollution, Appadurai's gastropolitics, and Ramanujan's observations on Indian epistemologies. Consuming prohibited foods, particularly meat and wine, is depicted as both an existential critique of Brahminical authority and a violation. The idea that purity is innate is undermined by Naranappa's rebellion and Chandri's protective presence; instead, the book upholds relational ethics based on reciprocity, caring, and shared vulnerability.

The ambiguous conclusion leaves Praneshacharya torn between inherited law and emerging humanity rather than fully celebrating liberation or restoring ceremonial order. This unsolved situation highlights the main idea of the book, which is that caste-based food philosophies dehumanize people by separating ethics from empathy. The article persuasively concludes that *Samskara* demolishes the myth of ceremonial purity and reclaims the body, hungry, wanting, mortal as the fundamental foundation of ethical life by emphasizing food as both a material necessity and a symbolic weapon.

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