“Samskara” the title and motif in the novel: denotations, connotations and possibilities

- A key word and concept in Panini’s seminal text on grammatology, *Ashtadhyayi*. His sutra on “samskara” runs thus: “Samparibhyang karotou bhushane” i.e. “samskara” is etymologically derived as “sam”- √kr + “sut”, with the “sut” signifying refinement (bhushan) and featuring as the “s” after “sam” in “Samskara”.
- In an Indic epistemological matrix (with which U. R. Ananthamurthy’s *Samskara* engages), thus, “Samskara” denotes an indispensable element of refinement, and conse quently remaking and transformation, be it that of a site or a person. As another classical text *Kashikavritti* posits, “Sato Utkarshanam Samskarah”, i.e. “samskara” is a process of the incremental accretion of excellence.
- “Samskara” thus makes a person or a site receptive to and increasingly resonant with alternative possibilities; it prepares a site, a receptacle (aadhar) or a person for a specific purpose which exceeds the tyranny of the trivial
- As per classical Indic positions, then, “samskara” induces “devabhaba” i.e. divine characteristics in a human, or it makes him ”rishikalpa” i.e. “approximating a sage”. In the text, however, Praneshacharya becomes increasingly human through a process of self-making (and unmaking) – accidental, unchartered - that besets him with unsettling queries.
- Samskara thus connotes both a routine of refinement as per prescribed rites and a rite of passage; it denotes a submission to prescribed rituals of reverence, even as it connotes a process of mutation, transit and its caesura and the lure of the liminal.

“Samskara” and a myth: “Samskara” as unchartered route through unlikely encounters in U. R. Ananthamurthy’s novel - I

- “Samskara”, the term rich in trans-factors and the promise of transformation and betrayals, becomes a defining trope through the novel; in its transgressive possibilities, it informs the Mahabharata myth which remains a node of genesis for the text, according to U. R. Ananthamurthy.
- The prefix “trans-” signifies “across”; such a signifier invokes the undrawing, testing and smudging of boundaries. In its thematic engagements as well as in terms of form, *Samskara* the novel is rich in trans-possibilities. *Samskara* pivots on unsettling meetings and conversations between diverse sets of unlikely others. These could happen between disparate counters such as Praneshacharya and Naranappa, Praneshacharya and Chandri, or even Praneshacaharya and Putta the Malera, an unthinking sensationalist who becomes his guide for a brief phase at the Melige car-festival (Look up Ramanujan Afterword 121 for a character-sketch of Putta) – a riot of colours and a moveable feast of cock-fights and distractions catering to an audience akin to Putta, in their anger and lust for immediate gratification.
- Sage Parashara’s meeting with boatswoman Matsyagandhi while she was ferrying him across a river, remains the ur-myth inspiring all of these encounters in the novel, according to U. R. Ananthamurthy: “Here too, in the novel, Praneshacharya meets Chandri most unpreparedly … I am reminded of Parashara meeting Matsyagandhi … The only thing that is pure in the novel is the meeting.”

Samskara" and a myth: "Samskara" as unchartered route through unlikely encounters in U. R. Ananthamurthy's novel

- The meeting, according to tradition, had happened across multiple barriers/partitions – of varna, chastity, austerity, erudition and social codes – and performed a moment of transgressive, liminal possibilities, unentangled from and unabashed by social prescriptions and proscriptions. Interestingly, such a possibility/moment is embedded within the epic Mahabharata, a venerable text in tradition. And the moment has been memorialized as that of the conception of sage Vyasa, ascribed as compiler of the Vedas and composer of Mahabharata as per tradition.
- A lot of outcastes – untouchables like Chandri, Belli (50, 91) – farmers like Sheshappa and Muslims like Ahmad Bari (61-62) gather in the text ostensibly woven around the Madhva Brahmins of Durvasapur. These invisibilised figures clamour for inclusion and visibilisation, interrogating the architectures of exclusion that define Durvasapura and the lives of the Madhva brahmins.
- In a way, *Samskara* pivots on and queries the exclusionary structure of caste in a brahmanical system; it recognizes caste as the engine of that deeply hierarchical society. The text could be seen as a plea for radical samskara of a casteist society which needs to give way to inclusion and non-discrimination. What if the caste barriers are removed, *Samskara* seems to ask. Is there a way of re-imagining Indic traditions and their possibilities outside of caste? Has there always been a parallel resilient imagination, and social reality, of inter-caste entanglements, normatively brushed under the carpet? To what does the mixed caste of Malera – "a Brahmin-Sudra caste" (Ananthamurthy 143), the caste of Putta (96) – indicate? And the Mahabharata myth of the meeting outside of caste? "In the Indian civilization, there must have been a time when Brahmin and Sudra were one … [And later] There must have been some Brahmins who flouted the [caste] rules and became lower in the hierarchy", Ananthamurthy reflects(143).

Of other intersections: *Samskara* as a translational text

- *Samskara* the novel is a site of confluence of apparently disparate, even contrapuntal, genres and schools of thought – it hosts Hegelian dialectics in the obvious binaries of Praneshacharya-Naranappa and the Devammas of Durvasapura vs. the Sudra and untouchable women like Chandri/Belli. Yet it remains home to the sanatani paradigm and the questions and dilemmas which it springs, at least for Praneshacharya.
- In the text, tradition is unraveled as incorrigibly plural: if it upholds shastric laws and proscriptions, especially regarding purity and pollution, it remembers too the moments and possibilities fecund in the transgression of such pre-scripts. Both Naranappa and Praneshacharya retell and inhabit such moments.
- Allegory and realism intersect in the novel. According to Ananthamurthy, *Samskara* is an "allegorical tale". "Here is a novel", he observes, "that cannot be realistically abandoned. It cannot be realistically interpreted either" (139). *Samskara* exceeds both the forms; Chandri and Belli, for instance, resonate with Puranic archetypes of apsaras like Urvasi, Menaka for the Madhva and Smarta brahmins (34, 68), but they are also vulnerable Sudras, inhabiting the fringes of an early twentieth century Karnataka village. And Praneshacharya remakes himself as the site of wrestling between allegory and realism: "In him an archetype wrestles with himself, and becomes atypical" (Ramanujan 125), as this archetypal brahmin of brahmins finds himself released into the unrest and defiant queries of a man unplucked from his certainties. After the meeting with Chandri, he finds himself transformed into a man of complexities and contradictions, i.e. a man caught in the modern condition.

Of other intersections: *Samskara* as a translational text

- Also, of course, the text – a product as much of Western thought as of the classical Indic paradigm – had been composed and translated in two languages. Written in Kannada by U. R. Ananthamurthy in 1965, it was translated into English by A. K. Ramanujan (1976). *Samskara* in Kannada and in English constitute two very different texts according to translator Susheela Punitha. As she observes, "when I read *Samskara* in English, I found it wanting. I felt the English version lacked the natural voluptuousness of Kannada that this novel needs … here it [voluptuousness] is fulsomeness, vitality. … People who can read the novel only in English may not be able to appreciate the intensity in the novel because AKR's style plays it down" (137). U. R. Ananthamurthy thinks that Ramanujan had translated the text in the English of an Englishman.

The text when "carried across" ["translation" etymologically means "to carry across"] from Kannada to English thus becomes a different text, and we get to engage with, as it were, a layered text when we read the translation – the English one, with a shadow of the Kannada original.

- *Samskara* thus remains a translational or a liminal text, in more ways than one – it "carries across" one form, one school of thought or one language to another and is situated at the confluence of both.

The “samskari” brahmins of Durvasapura

- Besides Praneshacharya and Naranappa, the other brahmins in the novel seem cardboard cutouts. They approximate caricatures and live fossil lives, corrupted entirely by their monstrous greed, gluttony and pettiness. Garudacharya (27, 37-38) is defined by his greed and has confiscated the ancestral property of Naranappa and Lakshmidevamma. Lakshmanacharya is a miser (15). Dasacharya is a glutton, Durgabhatta a lewd man. The guru of the Madhvas is no better, though he operates from a monastery. He confiscates the late Naranappa’s wealth for the monastery, in the name of Lord Krishna (75). For them, Naranappa had been an unabashed carrier of their guilty desires and fantasies.
- Some of the offspring and wards of these brahmins, inspired by Praneshacharya’s puranic tales and Naranappa’s rebellious example, shed the Madhva rites and rituals and the hypocrisy that have come to characterise the agrahara. Garudacharya’s only son Shyama was in Poona, he had escaped home and village to join the army, where the laws, including the diet, were laid down by the British (25). Lakshmana’s son Shripati hardly stays home, he has joined an itinerant local theatre troupe of Yakshagana players (28-29). Shripati has cut off his Brahmin tuft, wears his hair in a crop (Western style), has loosened ties with his family and even begun whistling obscenely (29).
- The vultures and crows and the dead rats and plague that finally colonise Durvasapura only perform the putrefaction that had long set in in the agrahara, in its air and in the hollowness of the rites and practices of its brahmins.

Praneshacharya and Naranappa – Counters?-I

- Naranappa the transgressor who willfully defies, defiles and dares the agrahara to excommunicate him – "He lived the life of a libertine in the heart of an exclusive orthodox colony (*agrahara*), broke every known taboo, drank liquor, ate flesh, caught fish with his Muslim friends in the holy temple-tank, and lived with a lowcaste woman [Chandri]. He had cast off his lawfully-wedded Brahmin wife, and antagonized his kin" (Ramanujan 119).
- The moment of dying – Yet as coma set in, Chandri remembers that he mumbled "O God Ramachandra, Narayana!" and cried out "Rama Rama" (40, 42) – Praneshacharya too wavers in deciding whether Naranappa was a sinner or a saint: "It's hard to know the inner workings of dharma. An arch-sinner, an outcaste, reaches salvation and paradise by merely uttering the name Narayana with his dying breath" (42). According to Indic traditions, sacrilege too might unfold a route to the sacred. "By an ancient inversion, salvation is as possible through intoxication as by self-discipline, through violation as through observance of the Law. The Lord may even be reached sooner through hate than by devotion", as Praneshacharya recounts (Ramanujan Afterword 123, *Samskara* 42).
- Even when he was alive, Naranappa countered Praneshacharya's code of austerity and penance with alternative possibilities embedded *within* the Indic tradition, such as the possibilities of exploration, transgression. "You read those lush sexy Puranas, but you preach a life of barrenness", he rails (23). Though Naranappa with his unabashed violations of the sacred continues to live in Durvasapura only under the aegis of British law, he roots his rebellion in the Puranic and shastric tradition. Why, he even mentions sages and the Parashara-Matsyagandhi myth so enshrined in tradition (21, 23). Both Praneshacaharya and Naranappa fall back on tradition to glorify their ways: both of them are men of wilfulness and arrogance. Are they that different after all?

Praneshacharya and Naranappa – Counters?- II

- Praneshacharya inscribes his life in austerity, worship and scholarship. He is a “grihi sanyasi” as it were; he had deliberately married an invalid to turn his marriage into an act of penance.
- Yet the narrative digs into the layers in this apparently immaculate exemplar of brahminism, and we find both Praneshacharya and Naranappa equally eager to convert each other to their respective, contrapuntal ways of life (21).
- And after Naranappa’s death, the dilemma around performing the last rites of this aberrant Madhva sets off Praneshacharya on an unorthodox rite of passage of his own. In the process, he sheds his earlier life and becomes a “preta”, hovering in the in-between space between one life and the next; he enters Naranappa’s world of transgressions and violations. His intense encounter with Chandri births him into a world convergent with Naranappa’s. As he walks away from the village, unstuck from tradition and identity (66-67, 94, 98), Putta becomes his guide through that world at the festival in Melige where Praneshacharya “is the marginal man, liminal like the unhoused dead” (Ramanujan 122) exiled to an afterlife, as it were.
- It is in this unsettled afterlife – concurrent to that of Naranappa – that Praneshacharya chooses to mutate and individuate, and is beset with questions that defy final solutions, and to which the shastras can offer no pre-ordained answers. Praneshacharya performs the “samskara” of his earlier self; he chooses to unmake himself, crafting the routes to his own unorthodox rites of passage, much like Naranappa.