

## A RITE FOR A DEAD MAN / SAMSKARA

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(1940)

### Story

This story is set in a conservative Brahmin community in south India in the 1930s. As was typical, all the Brahmin families in a village or town live together in their own neighbourhood, called an *agraharam*. The novel begins with an important scene, in which the main character, Praneshacharya, bathes the body of his ailing wife, Bhagirathi. He feels no sexual desire, because he has learned throughout his whole life and the twenty years of their marriage to renounce the flesh. Then, the action begins immediately when Chandri, a low-caste woman, comes to him and gives him the news that Naranappa (a Brahmin man who is her lover) has died. Everyone knows that Naranappa has taken up with this woman, in contravention of strict Brahmin custom, which is almost a law. More than that, he has ignored or broken every other taboo: he has eaten meat, drunk alcohol, befriended Muslims and boasted about his sexual adventures with Chandri and others. Even worse, he has taunted the Brahmins about their ritual-bound life as stupid and unnecessary. Despite this open defiance and desecration, Naranappa has not been excommunicated from the Brahmin community. No one knows why not—perhaps a lack of conviction in their own customs, or perhaps fear of consequences, or perhaps just ‘couldn’t be bothered.’ In any case, now the Brahmins face a dilemma. The body of the dead must be cremated in a ritual known as *samskara* (the title of the novel). Until that ritual is performed, no one in the community is allowed to bath, pray or eat. But, because of Naranappa’s outrageous and impious behaviour while alive, no one wants to touch his body. They can’t ask someone else, from another caste, to carry out the ceremony, because only a Brahmin can touch his body in order to perform this ritual. If he had been excommunicated during his life, then he would no longer be a Brahmin and anyone could perform the rite. But, and this is the crucial point, he was not expelled and therefore remains a Brahmin.

The dilemma weighs heavily on Praneshacharya since he is the spiritual leader of the community. He is the most accomplished scholar and best informed about ancient ritual texts, so everyone looks to him. While the Brahmins debate and argue about what can be done, the dead body begins to putrefy and to attract rats, in an obvious symbol of something rotten in the community. We also see examples of hypocrisy. The outwardly pious Brahmins begin to leer at the body of Chandri, the dead man’s still very alive lover. Chandri herself is overcome with grief for a man she truly loved. She is also even more anxious than the Brahmins to see that he has a proper funeral, and in a desperate attempt to entice them to cremate the body she offers them her gold jewellery. This offer induces some of the Brahmins to change their mind. Gaining gold is more important to them than the fear of losing their status in the community if they cremate the impious Naranappa. These greedy ones begin to quarrel over who should have the privilege of performing the last rites. With no final solution still in sight, Praneshacharya decides to go to the temple of Hanuman (the monkey god) to ask for advice. He worships the image and then waits for some sign, but hours later, he still has no clue. Then, while walking through the forest back to the Brahmin village, he meets Chandri, who is still in mourning. He is exhausted, she is distraught, and they fall into each other’s arms to offer comfort. Instead, they make love. Now, Praneshacharya has his own personal spiritual crisis. He has broken the sacred law that he has criticised Naranappa for breaking. He is no better than the reviled dead man, whose corpse is still decaying.

The concluding section of the book describes Praneshacharya’s journey on foot through forests and cities in search of an answer for himself. Should he go back to the *agraharam* and confess all of his misdeeds to his fellow Brahmins? Or should he seek out Chandri and fully embrace this newly discovered world of the flesh? During his journey, he meets a young man named Putta, who becomes Praneshacharya’s guru about the ways of the world outside of his conservative *agraharam*. Putta takes him to a carnival with games, acrobats and a gruesome cockfight, and finally a local

prostitute. Faced with all these new experiences, which he had denied himself for his whole life, Praneshacharya is paralysed with indecision. The novel ends without resolution.

## Themes

Purity Purity is the primary concern of traditional Brahmins, like those depicted in *Samskara*. Purity and purification, bathing and cleansing, dominate their lives, from their daily activities to their psychological anxieties of being made impure by the even accidental touch of an Untouchable or by a dozen other acts, such as contact with a menstruating women, a dead animal or a dead human. This is why Ananthamurthy chose to open his short novel with a scene in which Praneshacharya, the protagonist, is bathing the body of his wife. It is not an erotic scene; far from it, it is a demonstration of his purity of mind. He does not have sexual relations with his wife, believing that his sacrifice and self-denial will earn him a better cycle of rebirths in the future. As the author says, it is part of a daily routine that he has performed for the twenty years of their sexless marriage. After a bath for himself at dawn, he washes her, he puts flowers in her hair and then gives her holy water. In the evening, he will take another bath before a light meal and then settle down to lead the other Brahmins in prayers. The obsession with purity is also highlighted by the death of Naranappa. Not only is death inherently polluting, but Naranappa has lived a life of impurity with his drinking, meat-eating and living with a low-caste woman. The cleansing ritual that Praneshacharya has performed for this wife on that morning is the very last one he will perform because this is the beginning of the end for Praneshacharya's spiritual cleanliness and purity. As we learn, his extreme asceticism has blinded him to the physical enjoyments of the world outside of his rigid rituals.

Moral cowardice The preoccupation with ritual purity may make the Brahmins appear ridiculous, but the author is more interested in probing their deeper flaws, such as moral cowardice. This becomes evident in the complexity of the crisis that he, the author, has constructed for a community (which he knew well from his childhood and youth). For the dilemma that grips the Brahmin community—how to perform the funeral rites for a Brahmin who has renounced his Brahmin status?—is one of their own making. The key point of the crisis is that the Brahmins have failed to expel Naranappa from their community despite the fact that he has broken every rule in their book. And that failure is put squarely at the feet of Praneshacharya since he is the spiritual leader of the community. It is he who could not bring himself to expel the reprobate Naranappa. Throughout the novel, Praneshacharya tries to justify his failure to act. For example, he has promised Naranappa's mother that he would 'look after him.' But did that promise hold after the deliberate insults that Naranappa directed at him and the outrageous flouting of the community's customs? It is also suggested that Praneshacharya might have been afraid to expel the man because it would look bad for the community as a whole. Perhaps his inaction was in keeping with Praneshacharya's asceticism, his withdrawal from the world of the flesh? The author offers no answer, but it is clear that responsibility for the problem of the dead man lies with the living leader of the community.

Hypocrisy The novel is a devastating critique of traditional Brahmin values and customs, which earned the author the ire of many readers. The moral cowardice that the story exposes is lamentable, but hardly incriminating. That more severe judgement is expressed in the novel's other theme of overt hypocrisy. The Brahmins view Naranappa as corrupt, but they, too, are guilty of some of the same crimes. For example, a Brahmin named Durgabhata begins to leer at Chandri, the dead man's low-caste lover, and desire her sexually. Another Brahmin man, Dasacharya, is a miser who gets all of his food from the meals that Brahmins receive at death ceremonies. He pretends to be upset about the moral dilemma of Naranappa's death, but, in fact, he is worried about where his next meal will come from. There is also the devious Sitadevi, a Brahmin wife, whose son is in the army, where they eat meat, yet she has railed against meat-eating by Naranappa. The most dramatic hypocrisy is revealed when Praneshacharya, the spiritual goodie-goodie, finds sexual pleasure with Chandri, the dead man's lover. The life of bodily renunciation turns out to have been a very thin veneer hiding a cauldron of human desires.

## Characters

Praneshacharya Praneshacharya is the main character. He is the spiritual leader of the Brahmin community, who has criticised Naranappa for his breaking of taboos. But by the end of the novel, he himself has committed a similar act.

Naranappa Naranappa is the other key male character. Although he is dead when the action begins, we learn about his outrageous flouting of the Brahmins' rules and customs.

Chandri Chandri is Naranappa's low-caste lover, who first tells Praneshacharya that her lover is dead. She then grieves and tries to find a way to have him cremated. In the end, she also has sex with Praneshacharya, although their love-making is as much commiseration as sensual passion.

Bhagirathi Bhagirathi is Praneshacharya's wife, who is suffering from a mysterious illness and is childless.

### **Praneshacharya** (Ascetic)

**Character** *Praneshacharya is the protagonist of this novelistic critique of a traditional Brahmin community in south India (into which the author was born). He is introduced to us as the paragon of spiritual purity, a man who has renounced all worldly desires, especially sex, even with his wife, in pursuit of salvation through sacrifice. He strictly observes his daily routine of bathing, praying and fasting. He is also a learned Sanskrit pundit and has become the 'acharya' or 'spiritual guide' of the community. He is a man of no visible flaws or faults. He treats his wife with kindness, if a little coldly, and he shows compassion and patience in dealing with various domestic disputes that arise in the community. When the crisis about what to do with Naranappa's corpse arises, he listens carefully to all the arguments and ponders a possible solution. Even before the crisis hits, though, we have hints that Praneshacharya is not entirely governed by ancient laws of purity. Despite Naranappa's blatant flaunting of those laws, Praneshacharya does not expel him from the community. He even wondered if the man's outrageous behaviour could be viewed as a series of questions to be asked of the ritual-bound community. He also shows a little humour at times. But the foundation of his character is renunciation, tinged with self-deprecation. For example, his wife chides him from time to time, saying, 'You have no joy in this marriage. Why not marry again and have children?' He dismisses this suggestion with the words, 'Who would want an old man like me?' although he is not yet forty years of age.*

**Activities** Praneshacharya follows a very strict daily routine. In the morning, he bathes his wife, says his prayers, eats a light meal and then gives a religious discourse to the gathered men of the community. The same pattern is repeated in the evening (with the exception of bathing his wife). He is also involved in trying to settle a variety of minor squabbles and disagreements within the community. When alone in the evening, he reads sacred texts.

### **Illustrative moments**

Secure Praneshacharya is a man whose mind and body are fixed in a routine that gives meaning and security to his life, and, more important, to his eventual death. He has no doubts because everything is explained in the scriptures, which he can read and explicate with a skill that is unparalleled in the community. He is the 'acharya', the spiritual guide or guru of his people, and his path is clear. This fixed security is illustrated in the very first paragraphs of the novel, when he is bathing his wife, who is an invalid. 'He bathes her, wraps her in a sari, offers flowers to the gods, puts flowers in her hair, and gave her holy water. She touched his feet, he blessed her. Then he brought her a bowlful of cracked wheat porridge from the kitchen...part of a twenty-year-old routine...that began with a bath at dawn, twilight prayers, cooking, medicines for his wife. Crossing the stream again to the temple for worship...After meals, the brahmins of the *agraharam* [neighbourhood] would come to the front of the house, and gather there to listen to his recitation of sacred texts...In the evening he would take another bath, say more twilight prayers, make porridge for his wife, cook, eat dinner. Then there would be more recitations for the brahmins who gathered again on the verandah.' Everything is in sequence, the correct sequence, nothing out of place, nothing wasted. The importance of this sense of security is underpinned when it is knocked away by the controversy over the dead man. Now, the placid Praneshacharya speaks to the other Brahmins with utter confusion: 'What's the way out now? Can we just fold our arms and stare at a dead body laid out in the *agraharam*? According to ancient custom, until the body is properly removed, there can be no worship, no bathing, no prayers, no food, nothing. And, because he was not excommunicated, no one but a Brahmin can touch his body.' Praneshacharya's world of certainty has been destroyed.

**Awakened** An even more life-changing event occurs later on in the novel, when Praneshacharya discovers that his lifetime of renunciation and his criticism of others' hedonism is completely hollow. This moment of self-awareness comes when he is at his wit's end to find a solution to the dilemma of the dead man's body. As a last act of desperation, he decides to go to the temple of Hanuman (the monkey god) to seek advice. He sits down in front of the god's image and performs an elaborate ceremony of worship, asking for the god to give him some sign as to how he should act. After several hours, he is frustrated at receiving no sign and wanders off in the forest, where he meets Chandri, the low-caste lover of the dead man. She is still distraught over the death, he is exhausted and they fall into each other's arms and make love. It is a powerful, sensual experience, tasting the pleasure that he had denied himself for so many years. When he awakes, he is not sure who he is, but he knows that he has enjoyed himself. The next time he bathes his aged wife's body, he simply sees her as a disgusting invalid. He is no longer interested in the life of penance. His sexuality has been awakened.

**Indecisive** We have seen that Praneshacharya is indecisive, especially in the issue of whether or not to expel Naranappa and later about what to do with his corpse. But he is even more confused and lost at the end of the novel. The moment occurs after Praneshacharya has slept with Chandri. When he awakes in the morning, he is lost: 'Where am I? How did I get here? What's this dark? Which forest is this?' Now he is in a situation not dissimilar to that of Naranappa, the moral reprobate. He has slept with a low-caste woman and cannot purify himself, no matter what he does. Knowing that he has nearly ex-communicated himself, and still unable to decide what to do about the rotting corpse of Naranappa, Praneshacharya leaves the village and wanders about. At one point, he meets a man, a non-Brahmin, called Putta, who takes him in hand and introduces him to a variety of pleasures at a fairground, including drinking alcohol and eating meat. Then, he leads him to a high-caste courtesan with whom Praneshacharya spends the night. Now, the spiritual guru is completely lost. He has done exactly what Naranappa did, but he doesn't have the courage to admit it to the community. Instead, he remains in hiding, paralysed by indecision. The end of the novel does not bring a resolution to Praneshacharya's journey.

**Naranappa** (Hedonist)

**Character** Naranappa is a fascinating character. For one thing, he is dead when the story begins, and so we know of him only through flashbacks, remembrances and recounted events. He also has many seemingly contradictory aspects. In the eyes of his fellow Brahmins, he is the scourge of the community, a reprobate who is the cause of the decline of morality, in both life and, even more so, death. While alive, he scandalised the community by his outrageous and licentious behaviour, and when he dies, his death poses a difficult dilemma for them. As they ponder what to do about his cremation, his corpse rots away, attracting rats and vultures. But the putrefaction, as the living Naranappa consistently pointed out, lies in the community itself. Naranappa is a social critic, who condemns the greed, cruelty and hypocrisy among the Brahmins. His character is juxtaposed to that of Praneshacharya, the spiritual guide. Praneshacharya has renounced life and has a sexless marriage; Naranappa embraces life and lives with a mistress. One is an ascetic; the other is a hedonist. The struggle between the two characters is explicit, and expressed by Naranappa: 'Let me see who wins in the end—you or me. I'll destroy Brahminism, I certainly will. My only sorrow is that there's no Brahminism left to destroy in this place, except you.' Unfortunately, Naranappa dies before he wins the battle, when the saintly Praneshacharya makes love with Chandri, his own lover.

Naranappa is a wealthy man, who has acquired a good deal of gold, which he hides in his large house at the end of a lane. He is also a kind and generous man. He takes up with Chandri, a low-caste woman, who is reviled as a 'whore' by the rest of the community, but he never mistreats her and never disowns her. He is open about their relationship, even citing examples in Sanskrit texts that would condone their liaison. His generosity is displayed when he gives a loan to a fish merchant who is broke and when he donates musical instruments to a travelling drama troupe.

**Activities** Naranappa spends most of time doing whatever he pleases. He lounges around on pillows, he drinks, he eats and he makes love. He goes fishing and he sings in his back garden. He is also active in Gandhi's campaign, often going to nearby villages to assist in arranging public political events. But his greatest love is watching plays performed by travelling troupes. This form of drama is called Yakshagana, which mixes music, singing, dance, dialogue and magnificent costumes.

## **Illustrative moments**

**Irreverent** Naranappa transgressed every taboo known to the Brahmins, including eating meat, drinking alcohol, and many other minor prohibitions on a person's activities. He broke these rules consciously and deliberately, in order to insult his fellow Brahmins. His unbounded irreverence is clearly illustrated in one action, which is remembered by Praneshacharya after Naranappa's death. On the morning of a very special, an 'auspicious' day, Naranappa had taken a group of Muslims with him to the stream belonging to the Ganesh (elephant-headed god) temple. While the Brahmins were bathing and praying in the water, he had fished with his Muslim friends. He had caught the sacred fish in those temple waters, and he had blithely carried them away to be fried and eaten. Those fish, which swam free and were quite large, were treated as extensions of the god. Men would go to the bank and feed them with bits of bread and cooked rice. The fish were also protected by a strong local belief: 'It was said that if any man caught and ate one, he would cough up blood and die.' That is why Naranappa chose to commit his 'sin' in front of everyone, to prove that their belief was baseless superstition. He caught and ate the fish, but did not die. He was irreverent, but it wasn't unpremeditated irreverence. He directed his heresy in order to make a point.

**Hedonistic** If Naranappa made a special point of flaunting his outrageous behaviour, just to enjoy the horror it induced in his fellow Brahmins, this does not mean that he didn't also enjoy those flagrant acts of hedonism for their inherent pleasures. If anything, the pleasure came first and the exhibitionism second. A good illustration of his extreme hedonism occurs in a scene, again recounted after his death by another person, where he and others were watching a dance-drama performed in a nearby village. It was late and dark, he had drunk a lot of alcohol but was still watching the play with great interest. A young woman was being dressed for her betrothal ceremony. It was a slow and seductive scene played beautifully by the actress. At one point, Naranappa, was so caught up in the eroticism of the scene, underscored by subtle drumming and whining of an oboe-like instrument, that he stood up and entered the play, which was being performed on the ground, with the audience sitting around in a circle. He rose and swayed to the music, then glided silently toward the young actress, who had stopped performing and was looking at him. Everyone watched as Naranappa approached the actress and then fell at her feet, in an act of devotion. In real life, as in the play, Naranappa was controlled by his senses and derived great pleasure when they were satisfied.

**Political** Nevertheless, despite his hedonism, Naranappa was also extremely interested in politics. He supported the abolition not of the caste system but of restrictions between castes (marriage, eating, etc.). The 1930s, when the novel is set, was the height of the nationalist movement led by Gandhi and his Congress Party. There were marches, demonstrations, riots and arrests all over India, including the region where the Brahmins live. And, yet, Naranappa is the only character in the novel who shows the slightest understanding of these social and political circumstances outside the isolated Brahmin community in which he and the others live. During one conversation with a conservative Brahmin, he says, 'The Congress party is coming to power. You'll have to open your temple doors to people of all castes.' But an even better illustration of his commitment to Gandhian politics is his active social work among young boys in the villages surrounding the Brahmin quarter. One day, he hears that the Congress Party is about to hold a public rally in one of those nearby villages. Immediately, Naranappa goes there and organises a troupe of boys to perform at the event. He teaches them to sing songs and buys them a set of Congress uniforms to wear. Naranappa was a fierce critic of the hypocrisy of his fellow Brahmins, but he was also a man who tried to implement his ideas of social equality.

**Chandri** (Virtuous)

**Character** Chandri is the low-caste lover of the Brahmin Naranappa. As such, she has absolutely no standing in the Brahmin community. She is reviled as a whore and devil, accused of bringing the entire community into disrepute. However, in her thoughts and actions, she outshines all the women and the men in the novel. In this sense, she is the female counterpart of Naranappa, whose real character is the opposite of his public image. Chandri the whore acts like the model wife. No clearer estimation of her virtue could be given than is found in the speech of another character: 'Whatever you may say—and we Brahmins do bray—no matter if she is a whore. In a hundred mile radius, is there any woman as good, as bright, as lovely as Chandri? No one! She was better than any wife would have been to Naranappa. If he drank too much and vomited, she wiped up the mess.'

Chandri is entirely selfless, acting only for Naranappa's benefit. For example, being conscious of food taboos, she warns Naranappa not to eat food prepared by her. And, on several occasions, she scolds Naranappa for speaking so rudely to others and tries to bring harmony between him and the community. She is also portrayed as a 'typical woman' in her desire to have a child by Naranappa because 'of his good looks.' That was her only regret, that after living with him for ten years, she was still without a child. 'If I had borne a son,' she used to think, 'he could have become a great musician; if a daughter, she would have been a famous dancer, in the classical style.'

When Naranappa is dead, she is the only one who genuinely wishes to have him cremated in the proper way. She offers her gold jewellery to induce the Brahmins to act. And when they do not, she takes it upon herself to have him cremated, in order that he will have a good after-life and rebirth. Her character is shown, too, at the end of the story. After a night of love-making with Praneshacharya, which would presumably lead to a close relationship with this respected man, she decides to leave the area altogether.

**Activities** Chandri behaves much like an ordinary Hindu wife during her ten-year relationship with Naranappa. She keeps house and stays indoors most of the time. She likes to dress with care and to wear fragrant flowers in her hair. For this purpose, she tends her garden, where she lavishes special attention on a black flower called 'the Night Queen.' She cooks meals for Naranappa, but they are vegetarian only, while she herself goes to the house of Muslims where she eats fish and meat.

### **Illustrative moments**

Vulnerable Chandri is a vulnerable person, as a woman, as a low-caste woman, as a mistress of a Brahmin and now as a woman who has lost her lover. We first meet Chandri when she appears before Praneshacharya's house, just after he has finished his morning routine. If he speaks with her now, he would have to have another bath to wash away the pollution [since she is low-caste] before eating. Knowing this, she pulls the edge of her sari over her face when he comes out to meet her. She is also afraid and unable to speak because she is both overwhelmed with grief at the death of Naranappa, her lover, and embarrassed to speak to a Brahmin man in public. 'What's the matter?' the Brahmin asks, and she finds the words stuck in her mouth. 'He,' she manages to say. And, when encouraged by the Brahmin, she adds, 'Gone.' She has come to him to make sure they will perform his funeral, as is the custom, but the Brahmins hesitate because if they touch him they might be excommunicated since Naranappa was such an impure man when alive. All this waiting, for a decision, from the Brahmins, is unbearable for Chandri. She waits, keeping her face covered, holding on to a pillar of the verandah for support, lest she fall over. As she stands there, weeping, Brahmin women begin to insult her as a 'whore' and a 'witch', and curse her to be 'torn apart by tigers.' Next, the Brahmin men begin to ogle her, this 'choice object' which normally did not stir outside the house. Chandri is all alone and grieving, cursed by the women and leered at by the men.

Decisive Days pass and the Brahmins cannot make up their mind about what to do with Naranappa's rotting corpse. Chandri is now desperate, fearing that her lover will never get a proper cremation and will become a ghost floating between heaven and earth. While the Brahmins ponder, Chandri takes the initiative. She goes to a meeting of the men, who are debating the dilemma facing them, and 'loosened her four-strand gold necklace, her thick bracelets and her bangles, and placed them all in a heap in front of Praneshacharya. Her sudden decision stunned the Brahmins.' Her jewellery, given to her by Naranappa, was worth a fortune, and she has now donated it toward the cost of his cremation. Each of the apparently ascetic Brahmins begin to calculate the value of the jewellery, which would be given to whoever decided to perform the last rites. Chandri, abused and insulted, secretly smiles inside, knowing that her sudden and decisive action has exposed their hypocrisy. But even then she is not satisfied and takes further action. She seeks out a Muslim man, who helps her carry the rotting corpse to the cremation ground, where she burns it without any consideration for proper ceremonies.

Compassionate Chandri is portrayed as a kind and compassionate person throughout the novel, perhaps the only person without malice, hypocrisy or moral weakness. She is genuinely in mourning at the loss of her lover, but that is not the only man for whom she shows compassion. In an extremely significant moment, she also tries to comfort Praneshacharya, the spiritually pure leader of the Brahmins, or so it seemed. The scene takes place after sunset in the forest. She is walking alone,

anxious about the fate of Naranappa's corpse, when she meets Praneshacharya, who is returning from hours spent at a temple seeking advice from Hanuman, the monkey god. He is exhausted, having fasted, and stumbles along, muttering words of despair. Seeing his dishevelled state, Chandri takes pity on him. 'Suddenly, she overflowed with compassion. The poor man. Famished, distressed, he had grown so lean in a single day for me [trying to solve the dilemma of a cremation for her lover]. She wanted to hold his feet and offer him her devotion. She fell at his feet. It was pitch dark, nothing was visible. As she bent over...her breast brushed his knee...the buttons on her blouse caught and tore open.' Before long, they make love on the jungle floor in the dark night, and 'his hunger, so far unconscious, raged in a primitive scream.' Chandri wants only to comfort him and show him her devotion, but her compassion is overwhelmed by his passion.