

IDENTITY CRISIS IN U. R. ANANTHAMURTHY'S *SAMSKARA**Rupali Dubey, MA Semester IV Student, IIS University, Jaipur***Abstract:**

*The appropriation of role or responsibility is not only conferred to an individual by political or social set-ups but also by religious institutions. When an individual has performed such a role for a long time, he begins to associate his identity with this role assigned to him by these institutions, believing it to be his identity. Consequently, the moment that role is removed from him he gropes for his true identity and he succumbs into a state of crisis. For the protagonist, Praneshacharya in U. R. Anantamurthy's Samskara the moment of adultery with Chandri pushes him into a double-bind of dharma, because at one end, he was unable to control his passion towards his sensuous desires after his first sexual encounter, on the other; he was unable to absolutely break himself from his past religious identity. Although he is guilty and has lived a life of sacrifice and asceticism; but he neither has the courage to confess his guilt nor the determination to control his urge for sensuality. Suffering from this dilemma, the Acharya is suddenly confronted with a question that threatens his existence: who he is and what remains of his identity if he discards his brahmanhood? In this context, this paper studies the state of Acharya's identity crisis in the light of the knowledge of spirituality and self from the Bhagavad Gita to comprehend his state of crisis and examines the extent to which a superficial understanding of religion triggers his crisis.*

*“All actions are performed by Gunas of Prakriti [attributes of nature]; he who is deluded by the ego thinks, 'I am the doer'.”*

*-The Bhagavad Gita III: 27*

U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* not only depicts the socio-cultural set-up of a typical agrahara but also throws a deeper insight into the socio-religious life of the community that eventually can be seen to be harvesting the seeds of the overall social and moral crisis that erupt as identity crisis in the protagonist. In this context, Kumar (99) states that the novel reveals the architectonic quality and dedication to the morality of a story that is set in a region of diverse cultures and religions. From birth to death, every act of human life is governed and controlled by religion. The, thus established rituals do not even end after death. Religion and traditions can be seen closely integrated with each other in *Samskara* and form the background within which the Acharya quests for the true meaning of religion within and outside the scope of rituals, signifying the contrast between the spirituality and rituals. The conflict between these two polarities can be seen externally between the Acharya and Naranappa and internally in Acharya's consciousness.

Religion forms the fundamental background of the novel, highlighting the cult of brahminism within the Hindu social system wherein a special status assigned to the brahmins alienate them from humanity and demanded too much on purity and self-control from them. People's life in the agrahara was kept under strict control and by observance of rituals and vows pertaining to death, marriage, and worship. It was the sudden demise of the reprobate Naranappa when such monotonous semi-conscious existence of the members residing in the agrahara is disturbed and compelled to jolt out of its coziness and flung into turmoil (Kumar 99).

The impact of religion and community can be more clearly understood from the following lines by Naipaul:

Caste and clan are more than brotherhoods; they define the individual completely. The individual is never on his own; he is always fundamentally a member of his group, with a complex apparatus of rules, rituals, and taboos. Every detail of behaviour is regulated...Relationships are codified. And religion and religious practices lock everything into place. (Naipaul 102)

Religion establishes a set of codes, conventions, and rules of human behaviour and all these together constitute the supplement of its true or original meaning. With time, this supplement replaces the original and the former gaining full dominance, constitutes the religious consciousness of an individual. This is exactly the state of the brahmin settlement in Durvasapura, which formed the universe in a single lane for its members, a polity exclusively for the brahmins and who were burdened under the load of the inherited traditions. It is under the rigorous governance of the binaries such as sacred-profane and pollution-purity. This status of the religion in a society highlights its important place in the lives of the people, wherein it enmeshes with politics in the construction of cultural identity and identity, in turn, defines the direction of religion and politics thereby playing a fundamental role in determining the identity of an individual.

The deep entrenchment of the Acharya in the ritualistic tenets of brahminism in the absence of spiritual wisdom, his asceticism was not natural but forced, being derived from the scriptures. His understanding of the worldly affairs is largely influenced and conditioned by the religious and traditional ethos of Brahminism and that distanced him from the basic joys and sorrows of life. His excessive emphasis on religion and desire to live an ascetic life compelled him to neglect the physical aspects of his life. The Acharya believes that the problem of the observation of the death rites of Naranappa is a matter of the scriptures and turns to Manu and other holy texts for answers. These aspects of the Acharya's character highlight his defective understanding of the spirituality and religion and project him as a decadent Brahmin. Any such learned and a spiritually wise person would have addressed the crisis regarding Naranappa's funeral rites in a short while through his basic judgment and wisdom (Raval 117).

Sura (101) highlights that for Ramanujan, the central theme of Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* is the 'complex relations between asceticism and eroticism' wherein 'brahminism questions itself in a modern existential mode' while for V.S Naipaul, the novel is a dramatisation of a man's search for identity and reveals the Indian conception of self. The obsessive and neurotic reliance of the Acharya on the religious texts holds the roots for the ultimate crisis of identity experienced by him. The traditions and rituals of brahminism compelled the Acharya to restrict himself and remain untouched by passion, which eventually being repressed for years flow out uncontrollably in full momentum towards Chandri.

Naipaul further states:

Knowingly or unknowingly, Ananthamurthy [sic] has portrayed a barbaric civilisation, where the books, the laws, are buttressed by magic, and where a too elaborate social organisation is unquickened by intellect or creativity of ideas of moral responsibility (except to the self in its climb to salvation). These people are all helpless, disadvantaged, easily unbalanced; the civilisation they have inherited has long gone sour; living instinctive lives, crippled by rules...they make up a society without a head. Naipaul (109)

However, despite the act of the Acharya, he cannot be alleged as a corrupt, hypocritical or avaricious like the other members of his community, yet he was the very part of the decadent brahmin settlement, that was still deeply rooted in orthodox rituals and religious tenets that did not have any scope for spiritual growth. Eventually, with the course of events in the life of the Acharya, the shells of his customs and rituals break off and he realises that he no more fits into the coded and stratified existence established in the agrahara. Believing that he is not fit enough to hold the position of a revered priest, deliver sermons on religious consciousness, fulfil the moral and religious expectations of the society; he feels that there is no role he can acquire now and no safe social niche that can be occupied by him. This was

because he had always equated the brahmanic code, his position as a Brahmin priest in the community and morality to his essential self without any conscious thought. Suddenly, now when he had corrupted that brahmanic code and if he rejected his brahmanic roles, what would remain of his identity. The crisis thus compels him to search for his residual self that remains after the outer shells of the identity are discarded. Being in this situation, an appropriate parallel can be identified between the Acharya and Shakespeare's Richard II, wherein the latter also succumbs to a similar crisis of identity after being abdicated by his cousin brother Henry. Like the Acharya, he too, having served a role in the society for so long, he assumed that role to be his real self and felt lost the moment that role was lost (Mukharjee 84).

Richard: ... I have no name, no title

No, not that name was given me at the font  
But 'tis usurp'd: alack the heavy day!  
That I have worn so many winters out,  
And know not now what name to call myself.

..... (King Richard II Act VI Scene I)

As Acharya's life was based in extreme asceticism, he had cut himself completely from the common joys and sorrows of basic human life. Brahminism became like a trap for him where each of his decision regarding life was subjected to an inviolable code established centuries ago. Unconsciously, he had equated the brahmanic code of rituals with his essential self.

After the night with Chandri in the forest, the Acharya feels that now he was no more the 'crest jewel of Vedanta' but a lowly brahmin who was on his alms collection rounds in the village. On shedding his identity as a revered brahmin priest, he was no more than an anonymous and casteless wanderer, which became the core of his crisis regarding his exact identity. His initial impulse on leaving the village after cremating his wife was to attain freedom from the obligations and duties towards his religious position and the community and even from meditation and his asceticism. This can be identified as the beginning of the peeling of the layers of his identity. He loses all influence and lustre of his esteemed position as a revered Brahmin priest and prepares himself to bear the loss of his public esteem (Baral 200). All that remains after the peeling of the external layers of his identity will be his true self and become the means to resolve his crisis. Being an orthodox brahmin, he realises the need to affirm the vital and essential significance of his personal identity but the superimposition of Brahmanism on his personal existence had overshadowed his perception about his identity and succumbed him to the crisis.

According to Chapter 13:1 of Bhagavad Gita, man is composed of three bodies: physical, astral and spiritual. These three bodies of man are encased by five *kosas* or coverings that layer the soul. Just as the human body is covered with layers of cloths, the Self is also covered with *panchakosas* (five sheaths), namely: *annakosa* (food sheath) or the physical layer perceived through our senses that covers the physical body; *pranamayakosa* (air sheath) or the energy layer guiding our physiological activities; *manomayakosa* (mental sheath) or the seat of all emotions; *vijnanamayakosa* (intellectual sheath) or the wisdom layer that is not perceivable by the senses that cover the astral body and *anandamayakosa* (bliss sheath) that covers the causal body (Yogananda 865).

These sheaths form the five layers that cover the true self or the soul of man and are realised through our true nature of bliss and oneness with the universe. To realise the true nature of the self, it is essential that the peeling of these layers is undertaken and moving progressively in life through each of these layers, one can experience the radiance of the true self (Sreeram 40). The onset of the crisis being experienced by the Acharya can be seen as the beginning of the process of peeling off these layers, which if undertaken appropriately can help him realise his self and resolve his crisis (Kumar 113).

The eventual conception of the identity crisis experienced by the Acharya can be seen to have emerged from a series of dilemmas. The crisis thus begins with the dilemma of whether identity is

alienable or inalienable from the body and whether the dead body of Naranappa continued to be a brahmin even after his demise. However, when the Acharya is unable to reach any decision about it, the dilemma reappears in a different form, wherein he embattles with the question of whether a desire is alienable or inalienable from the body. Although he had left desire, desire had not left him yet. The Acharya aspires to transcend the deadly sins of the lust of greed, yet his shortcoming is that he has not achieved the psychic wholeness so essential for the realisation of self, because of having been in any form of physical or emotional relationship with a woman. In this respect, R. K. Gupta (18) states:

There are chinks in Praneshcharya's armoury, too. Immeasurably superior as he is to the other brahmins of the agrahara, even he has not succeeded in completely banishing the demonic, so that there is an unmistakable admixture of the earthly in his composition. Although he has practiced rigorous self-denial all his life, he vicariously enjoys the sensuous beauty of heroines in poetry and drama. (Gupta 18)

The journey to the forest taken by the Acharya after the cremation of his wife makes him understand that his struggle is between asceticism and sensuality. While he believed him to be practicing asceticism, his speeches and his relationship with Chandri was directing his attention towards sensuality. The battles between asceticism and sensuality, tradition and defiance, dharma as law and nature, desire became the centre of his thoughts. The crisis that began with, the brahminic identity of Naranappa's corpse to decide over his cremation rites, transforms into a new conflict regarding his identity. This new crisis of identity awakens the Acharya into a state of awareness.

Sharma explains the conflict at two levels, externally in the agrahra regarding the cremation of Naranappa's corpse and internally in the mind of the Acharya by stating:

The sages of ancient India, in their search for the ultimate nature of reality, spontaneously adopted a two-track approach. One approach looked outward-at the universe and sought to discover its ultimate ground. The second approach looked inward-at the individual from the inside-and sought to discover the ultimate ground of one's personhood... This the sages identified as *Atman*, the ultimate ground of the self. (Sharma 18)

Based on this perspective, which also aligns with the ideals of the Bhagwada Gita, realisation of the difference between the inner and outer layers through the journey from materialism to idealism and bringing his religious learnedness face to face with his lust and carnal desires can help him realise his self at the end and understand that the self is ultimate and identity is only superficial and temporary (Krishnamurthy 13).

One of the fundamental polarities identified in the novel and eventually leads to the cause of the crisis suffered by the Acharya are rooted in the dilemma between direct indulgences in the sensual fulfilment in various aspects of life and an absolute detachment through the denial of the senses (Mukharjee 86). This also highlights the indecisiveness between desire and duty, which forms the major area of crisis for the Acharya. After the night with Chandri in the forest, the Acharya suddenly feels his vision to be clearer as if a veil that had separated him from a throbbing and pulsating world for years had dropped and each of his five senses awakened in the awareness to a sudden joy and realisation. He discovers the simple and unselfconscious response to life.

Below were green grass smells, wet earth, the wild Vishnukranti with its sky blue flowers and the country Sarasparilla, and the smell of woman's body sweat (Ananthamurthy 67).

This extract demonstrates the way in which the one act of love rather than being an initiation into adulthood paradoxically makes him realise the sensory nature of childlike perception and consciousness. He is able to feel the coolness of water while swimming, the warmth of the sand while rolling over it and a feeling of pleasure when a playful calf caressed his neck. His sensibility became more acute as the smell of grass, the colour of the flowers could perceive them more sharply. This highlights the significance of psychological, emotional and physical fulfilment of desires to be able to realise the beauty of life rather

than in suppressing them in the name of morality and virtue.

The liberation that was desired by the Acharya by practicing religion and living a life of austerity can be achieved only when he has achieved the state of non-attachment or renunciation, withdrawn from his consciousness and possessed the highest spiritual accomplishments. This, according to the Bhagavad Gita 18:78, is however, possible when one has attained victory over the four *purusharthas* namely, *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (material wealth and affluence), *kaam* (pleasure and desires) and *moksha* (ultimate freedom) that leads to self-realisation after one is able to get rid of the physical and psychological bondage (Yogananda 1101). In this regard, the Bhagavad Gita stresses on dutiful action in Chapter 3:8 by admonishing the monks and all renunciants who leave the world to live a life of endowed hermitage and pass their time only in eating and reading believing themselves to be leading a life of piety and austerity. The verse emphasises on *Karma* or dutiful action and fulfilment of all worldly duties and responsibilities and asserts that through the realisation and fulfilment of all senses, emerge successfully out of them and attain victory over *purushartha* (Yogananda 346).

For this purpose, Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita expounds that the one that practices spirituality while fulfilling the duties of *grahistha ashram* is the biggest yogi of all times. This can also be supported by the *Manu Smriti* and the Vedas that divide our lives into four different stages, termed as, the four ashrams. These are *brahmacharya* (student-phase), *grihasta* (householder-phase), *vanaprastha* (forest dweller and sanyasa (renunciation stage). The *brahmacharya ashram* or celibacy is a period from the age of 10 to 25 and is dedicated to laying a foundation of spiritual knowledge in the child by living the life of a disciple, with the aim of being equipped to be able encounter any challenge in life through the realisation of his supreme self and independent thinking. It helps him in developing a strong foundation of *dharma*. The second phase from the age of 25 to 50 years form the *grihasta ashram* and required the disciple to get married and fulfil the responsibilities of a householder towards his wife, children, pursues material and physical fulfilment and serves his parents and society (Shukla 49). It allows an individual to fulfil and satisfy his material, social, physical and emotional desires, and needs and thus attain victory over *artha* and *kaam*. The following stage is the *vanaprastha* ashram from the age of 50 to 75 years and requires living a life of giving by withdrawing from the family and society to have a salutary effect on the mental and physical well-being and gain higher spiritual maturity with the help of worldly wisdom acquired from the previous two stages. This stage thus helps in observing the third *purushartha dharma* and help in preparing for the last phase. The last stage is the *sanyaas* ashram that ranges from the age of 75 years and lasts until the end of one's life. This forms the stage of renunciation, wherein an individual gives up his identity and position completely and finds his real self to attune himself completely to the true consciousness within him. This last phase helps in observing the fourth *purushartha*, namely, *moksha* or the ultimate freedom. The observance of these four *ashrams* can thus be seen to be playing a highly supportive role in helping an individual in attaining victory over his desires and expectations and be able to shed all the layers that cover his true self and attain self-realisation (Shukla 50).

In the case of the Acharya, it can be seen, that although he was following these phases of life as defined by the scriptures but only literally because he could not understand the actual hidden meaning of these ashrams and their purpose in attaining the *purusharthas*, and reaching spiritual wisdom. This was the reason that despite being in the *grahistha* ashram, being married to Bhagirathi and believing to be fulfilling his duties as a householder; he did not indulge in fulfilment of his physical and emotional desires and they eventually turned into repressed desire because of his excessive self-control. Although the Acharya has fulfilled the vows of his marital responsibilities, his marriage had never able to give him the fulfilment of his sensibilities. This was because he did not realise the purpose of this ashram to be gratifying his sensual desires and overcoming them to be able to attain a higher stage of spiritually. This can be seen to be a fundamental cause of his physical surrender before Chandri because his sensual desires have been repressed until now and he did not use his *grahistha* ashram to satisfy them (Ananthamurthy 125).

Krishnaswami (132) explains that the Acharya had submitted to his urge of desire because *prakriti* (nature) is of higher order than *purusha* (an individual). Despite having married to Bhagirathi, he had no taste of sexual pleasure and would feel proud of himself believing that marrying an invalid helps him get ripe and ready. From this ideology of the Acharya, it can be identified that his concept of ripeness suggests some ill-understood faith because of his reducing a less fortunate human being to an object of pity. The sense of having the wisdom of the world can be seen to be absent in him and he suffers by repressing his desires. His superficial understanding of asceticism and renunciation only manifested his lack of vital experiences in life. In this context, R. K. Gupta (17) makes an important observation:

Although his (Praneshcharya's) very name implies "life", he is when the novel opens, ironically enough committed to a complete denial of life through renunciation. He has based his life on extreme asceticism and sacrifice eschewing in the process large areas of vital human experience. (Gupta 17)

Chapter 13 of the Bhagavad Gita explains that *Purusha* or witness is the transcendent presence of the God in Creation as the Individualised soul while *Prakriti* is the immanent kinetic aspect of the God in the form of the Creator of the Universe and all its being. All the *gunas* are the born out of *Prakriti* and being conditioned by it, the individualised soul is unable to perceive the infinite within his limited self. The *jiva* that is identified with the body believes itself as the ego and experiences pleasure, joy, sorrow, and pain because of the entanglements with the *gunas* that originate from the *Prakriti*. *Purusha* and *Prakriti* can also be understood as the conscious and the unconscious respectively, wherein the former is identified as the inner being while the latter is identified as the outer factors (Yogananda 862).

While the Acharya believes him to have been following and fulfilling his duties in respect of these four *ashrams*, he was not ripe enough in his preparation of spiritual growth and was unaware regarding the realisation of self. He was fulfilling the duties of the *grahistha ashram*, but his duties had not given him fulfilment of his psychological, emotional and physical requirements. This can be identified as the fundamental cause because of which on his close encounter with Chandri, *prakriti* dominated and he could not hold himself back because his unconscious ruled over his conscious. Just as the revered sage Parashara submitted to the desire of the fish-smelling Matsyagandhi, the Acharya, who could describe the beauty of Shakuntala without being stirred owing to his strong will, found his natural instinct dominated him and himself surrendering to Chandri. Therefore, by living a life of self-denial and repression of desires, the Acharya was not being a hypocrite or an ascetic but was ignorant of the true meaning of spirituality. Was he aware of the presence of the two forces of *prakriti* and *purush* within himself, he could have been able to understand that *Purush* is beyond the biological dualities and was still unpolluted despite having slept with Chandri and that his continued desire for her was the dominance of his unconscious desires over his conscious because they have been repressed for years (Chopra 27).

Acharya's internal turmoil can be seen to be operating on *karma* theory of pre-ordainment to a considerable extent wherein the doctrine of the freedom to choose the decision moving from 'being' to 'becoming' seems to overpower him in respect of his future course of actions or decisions. He seeks absolution in the wheel of karma and comes to the realisation that 'even if he had left desire, desire had not left him' (Ananthamurthy 78). While ruminating upon his decision to give in with Chandri, he realises that despite losing control over his instinctive powers, it was his responsibility to decide. This even makes him wonder about how the sages could have maintained their piety and overcome such opposites and conflicts by living with them. These thoughts make the moral man realise his helplessness because morality composed of duty, character, virtues, responsibility were associated with his understanding of his identity before the conflict emerges in his consciousness. This, however, would not be experienced by an amoral man because he never uses a moralist lens to view his actions. This also signifies the reason why Naranappa, living an individualistic and hedonist life never find himself in such a conflict.

While the lifestyle led by Naranappa involving an excessive indulgence in pleasure and

debauchery, he cannot be alleged to be evil or sinner directly. On the hand, Acharya strictly observed a barren life that was full of sacrifice and austerity, where all spontaneity is stifled. The examination of these two characters demonstrates distortions of personal values wherein one is dominated by complete abandonment to the senses while the other maintains a restraint and denial of them all. Identifying Naranappa's lifestyle as demonic and ravenous, the Acharya aspires to bring him back to the right path of virtue through his own faith and austerities. However, this wilful and egotistical belief of the Acharya can be seen to be another demonstration of the similarly exaggerated greed for virtue, which was also the cause for his marrying an invalid and make a penance out of his daily life. After awakening in the arms of Chandri in the forest, he feels that he was defeated in the metaphorical battle between him and Naranappa in winning over the agrahara and feels that defeat fell flat on his face (Rath 112). However, a closer examination of his defeat can be seen to be rooted in his decision to stifle his natural instincts in his zeal for austerity and piety. It eventually breaks the shells within which the Acharya has been dwelling for years and makes him realise the angst about his identity in the wake of the realisation of his sensibilities. He ruminates and realises that he made an investment or a strategy to gain spiritual world by making a sacrifice in marrying an invalid and that his confidence of being a man of virtue and goodness was merely his misconception and hubris.

While brahminism can be thus seen to have been reduced to mere rituals and rites, the novel exposes the hypocrisy and double standards of the members of the community. The interior monologue and the self-reflection undertaken by the Acharya highlights his moral and ethical dilemma as he sets out in the quest to find the meaning of life and what remained of him if he rejected brahminism. His journey makes him realise the failure of religion and his falling into the abyss of uncertainty. His physical journey from the village corresponds to the journey of the mind that moves from a state of certainty to uncertainty and eventually realises the futility of the ascetic life that he had led which failed to help him become ripe for spiritual growth and eventual salvation (Mukharjee 97). Together with these aspects, the novel throws light on the dilemmas, dualities, contradictions, and paradoxes experienced by a man who is living in the modern age but his ideologies are rooted in the ancient past. This can be seen to be triggering a series of crisis ranging from social crisis to moral crisis to identity crisis within the society that is undergoing transitions of time and can only be pacified through a correct understanding of self and the religion. A religion that does not thrusts its rituals and tenets upon its followers but gives them the freedom to explore their true selves and realise their spiritual growth.

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