






**Spectres of Caste/Contagion: Death Anxiety and Caste Anxiety in U.R. Ananthamurthy's  
*Samskara***

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# Spectres of Caste/Contagion: Death Anxiety and Caste Anxiety in U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*

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## Abstract

The article critiques the traversal politics of caste and contagion through a critical dissection of what comes as a primarily biomedical excess of the outbreak—the dead body. It elucidates upon the becoming of the dead body into an untouchable where its “right to die with dignity” is deferred. The article reasons this stigmatisation of the deceased as a result of anxiety ensued in the living population facing the outbreak crisis. Through a close textual reading of U.R. Ananthamurthy's novel *Samskara* (1965), the article elaborates on the othering discourse of outbreaks and discusses the type of socio-immune response exhibited by a casteist body politic. The novel centres its narrative around a plague-stricken Brahmin community where the contested dead body of pestilence triggers an endless debate of humanistic morals and ethics. By equipping the Derridean lens of hauntology, the article reads *Samskara* as an outbreak narrative which informs about the social unpreparedness and indecisiveness expressed by caste groups. The article discusses two types of anxieties expressed in such a caste-based society, namely death anxiety and caste anxiety. It mediates how these anxieties are produced in inversion, creating a unique pattern of social instability and inertia with relevance to the socio-political discourse of India. The epiphenomenon of inverted anxieties in India is presented as a subverted narrative from the global patterns of anxiety charged by microbial invasions. Finally, the article examines how the dead regains spectral agency in order to reveal the social pathology of a community doubly infected with caste and contagion.

**Keywords:** Dead body, Contagion, Caste, Anxiety, Spectres and Outbreaks.

## Introduction

Pandemics have ‘plagued’ humanity over centuries in an intermittent manner and repetitive fashion. The gross recurrence of apocalyptic disasters and the evoked ‘haunting’ caused by them are widely read by scholars as haunting of “the past/present” (Blanco & Peeren, 2013); “the future” (Schwab, 2014); “Anthropocene” (Duncan, 2021); and finally, as “haunting Nature” in itself (Monnet, 2021). Jacques Derrida, in his seminal text *Specters of Marx*, writes about such ‘repetition’ of hauntings where he argues that it is “revenant [where] one cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back” (1994, p. 11, emphasis in original). He, thus, postulates the branch of ‘hauntology’ as an alternative to the ontological limitations of studying the human self and experiences and thus marks a spectral turn in reading and writing “ghosts” as a primary subject of interrogation and speculation and “haunting” as its subjective nature and agency. The article submits to the imperative need to bring forth an intersection of spectral discourse with that

of outbreak narratives, particularly to understand "the recent preoccupations with "trauma" in which the presence of a symptom demonstrates the subject's failure to internalise a past event, in which something from the past emerges to disrupt the present" (Weinstock, 2013, p. 63).

The article attempts to elucidate a reflective understanding of the feelings of insecurity and uncertainty generated by past trauma and the anxiety about the present conditions of global instability induced by recurring pandemics and scattered outbreaks of deadly contagions. It aims to contribute to the compelling scholarly gap in situating the discourse of spectrality in the genre of outbreak fiction by hauntologically reading U.R. Ananthamurthy's most popular yet controversial novel, *Samskara*. The book was first published in the Kannada language in the year 1965 and got later translated into English by eminent translator A.K. Ramanujan under the title *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* in 1976. The novel centres its narrative around a plague-stricken Brahmin community in the fictive town of Durvasapura. It problematises the tension generated by the epidemic crisis by debunking the modern outlook on binary notions such as living/dead, subject/object, sacred/profane and ultimately human/non-human. It does so by offering a dead anti-hero Naranappa, an un-Brahmanical Brahmin, who by carrying the plague to the closed-Brahmin space, triggers an endless debate of humanistic morals and ethics. The article discusses two types of anxieties produced in inversion in such a caste-based society, namely death anxiety and caste anxiety. It further unveils the haunting agency exerted by the spectres of the contested dead body of pestilence, which affects an interesting "inversion of the anxieties" (Jayagopalan, 2022), defuncting the spatial and ideological cordon sanitaires of Brahmanical biopolitics.

Considering outbreaks (including both pandemics and epidemics) as a global phenomenon incurring and recurring common responses across its spread, the research aims to reify the abstract haunted discourse of outbreaks by coupling the simulated spectres of 'contagion' and 'caste' generated in the novel *Samskara*. It equips the lens of hauntology as a deconstructive tool (Davis, 2005) to analyse the affective ruptures these spectres elicit upon the social and psychological well-being of the global vulnerable. By employing the term 'affective', it rather suggests the objective of this piece to measure the operation of the aforementioned 'inverted anxieties' of caste and contagion in the infected body-politic of agrahara—"a utopic spatiality of Brahmanical mores of purity and taboo, often concealing its own vices of human othering" (Jayagopalan, 2022, p. 142). The article elaborates on how this particular epiphenomenon of 'inversion of anxieties' informs about the peculiarity of cultural anxiety of caste, superseding its haunting negotiations in Indian body politic through a spectral mode. The dead body triggers caste anxiety even before it unveils the anticipations of death anxiety (Menzies & Menzies, 2020), otherwise known as Thanatophobia, onto the population of a plague-ridden Durvasapura—a spatial metaphor for an Indian body politic as crafted by U.R. Ananthamurthy's imagination to represent the community's preoccupations with caste as exacerbated through the plague epidemic.

The article thus critiques the traversal politics of caste and contagion in India by problematising the precarious position of "the untouchable dead" whose right/rite to die with dignity (Chatterjee, 2022; Kumari 2021) is deferred and even denied. The article positions the "untouchables"— which implies not just Dalits but also the diseased-deceased bodies here, in these discriminatory caste spaces fuelled with fear and stigmatisation during the outbreak crisis. The passive corpse of

Naranappa is observed to act as an active site for both caste and contagion to conflict and copulate. The article signifies the haunting enforced by the dead as a call to interrogate “our relation to the dead, examine the elusive identities of the living, and explore the boundaries between the thought and the unthought” (Davis, 2005, p. 379). The article further poses critical questions on how spectres are enabled and received during a crisis by society and how this spectral act of return (repetition) reframes and constitutes social reality. It perceives the spectre as “a metaphor with powerful reality” (Shaw, 2018) to unravel and understand the “plot of an epidemic” (Smith, 1941) by situating it within the discourse of the caste-based society of India. It also intermediates how hauntology encourages existential disorientation in the living through the dead, which here in the context of *Samskara* as an outbreak fiction arguably disturbs, deconstructs (if not destruct) and debunks the biopower of Brahmanism through a display of an extended necropower. Finally, the article scrutinises how these profane illuminations (Cohen, 1993), in the words of Walter Benjamin, invert the paradigms of anxiety, compelling a call for action to overcome the conjuration of “crisis-induced othering” by replacing it with “crisis-induced solidarity” as a required solution.

### ***Samskara* as an Outbreak Narrative**

“We should have seen it coming. The coronavirus may be novel but plagues are not” (2020), writes Fareed Zakaria in his *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*. He comments upon the marked unpreparedness of human society in facing the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic despite facing situations of similar nature in the past. Wald (2008) offers a similar statement while discussing on 2003 SARS outbreak where she writes that “while the emergence of coronavirus was new to medical science, the scenario of disease emergence was entirely familiar.” These statements, while discussing the range of disease outbreaks like COVID-19, SARS and plagues, converge at a single point of reference, that is, repetition. Repetition breeds familiarity and difference alike in the public imagination of disease outbreaks. Thus, it becomes essential to interrogate how these public imaginations of pandemics or epidemics are narrativised in the first place. What are the modes to familiarise and prepare ourselves for such an event that is both repeated and unexpected; known and unknown; present and absent—an event, in Derridean terms, that is ‘no longer’ and what is ‘not yet’? Mark Fisher (2012) elaborates on such an interstitial temporality of an event, here outbreak, as follows:

The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic “compulsion to repeat,” a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern). The second refers to that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior). (p. 19, emphasis in original)

Outbreaks are repetitive yet obscure, filled with anxieties of past trauma, present ambiguities and future anticipations. The narrativisation of these outbreaks offers an opportunity to subtly capture the virtuality of these microbial explosions, eventually clarifying the looming obscurities imposed by the contagion. These narratives, thus, help us see what we should have seen as “coming” and immunise ourselves socially and mentally to the epidemiological impact of the coming plague(s). Such narratives have been in circulation since the Renaissance starting from Giovanni Boccaccio’s collection of tales in *Decameron* (1353) to recent popular examples of renewal, such as Albert

Camus' novel *The Plague* (La Peste), published in 1947, to cite a few amongst a literary canon produced in the span of centuries across the globe. In the contemporary world of multimedia, the creation and circulation of such outbreak narratives have increased manifold as Wald (2008) writes how "the repetition of particular phrases, images, and storylines produce[s] a formula that [is] amplified by the extended treatment of these themes in the popular novels and films" (p. 2). These narratives contextualise the larger socio-political attitudes and mentality of the people attuned in alarm to the emergency of infectious diseases.

Lance Morrow, in his 1985 *Time* magazine supplement, creatively writes about the 'plague mentality' in context to the AIDS epidemic by offering a graphic introduction to the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 as given below:

An epidemic of yellow fever struck Philadelphia in August 1793. Eyes glazed, flesh yellowed, minds went delirious. People died, not individually, here and there, but in clusters, in alarming patterns. A plague mentality set in. Friends recoiled from one another. If they met by chance, they did not shake hands but nodded distantly and hurried on. The very air felt diseased. People dodged to the windward of those they passed. They sealed themselves in their houses. The deaths went on, great ugly scythings. Many adopted a policy of savage self-preservation, all sentiment heaved overboard like ballast. Husbands deserted stricken wives, parents abandoned children. The corpses of even the wealthy were carted off unattended, to be shovelled under without ceremony or prayer. One-tenth of the population died before cold weather came in the fall and killed the mosquitoes.

It is interesting to note how the above anecdote of the yellow fever of 1793 is written in relation to the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in 1981, tied with a shared thread called "plague mentality"—an allusion to another deadly contagion in itself. It implicitly suggests that the collective response of fear and anxiety generated by the masses are similar irrespective of the nature of the disease and its type; or the outbreak's location and time. Now, to further crystallise this argument and verify Morrow's proposition of 'plague mentality', it would be suitable to comparatively analyse Morrow's report with an excerpt from Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*, which reads as follows,

Hunger beat drums in their bellies and banished sleep, giving red eyes to the brahmins. They got up in the morning, washed their faces, and came to the village court, cursing Naranappa for the awful things now happening to the agrahara. Because of the stench indoors, children jumped about in the verandas and backyards. The women were scared that Naranappa's ghost now roaming the streets would touch their children. So, the unwilling urchins had to be spanked and pushed in and the doors had to be shut. Never before had they shut a door in broad daylight like this. There were no sacred designs to bless and decorate the threshold, nor any sprinkling of cow-dung water for the yard without them. The agrahara didn't feel that morning had dawned yet. Things looked empty, desolate. Bikoooo! they seemed to cry. It felt as if there was a dead body in every house, in some dark room. The brahmins sat in the village hall, their heads in their hands, not knowing what to do next. (p. 52)

The apocalyptic language of crisis penned by Morrow and Ananthamurthy from different periods and continents narrates overlapping symptomatology of fear and panic. It reveals the precariousness of the infected community and displays the social and psychological ruptures of the exposed society at risk. The quoted passages elucidate the social pathology of the infested community by describing the engendered paranoia of the plague mentality, which pervades both Philadelphia and Durvasapura equally in an unbiased manner. The fear generated by the virus could be observed as more harmful in disrupting the sterile human population than the actual virus in itself. Thus, it is the plague mentality that binds all forms of communicable disease outbreaks as universal, which is simultaneously materialised and delivered through the mode of writing as outbreak narratives. These stories assist the readers in comprehending the affectivity of the disease induced, both at the individual and social level, by the microbial agents in play. It speaks for itself to attest to the “universal grammar in the way humanity has responded to pandemics” (Venkatesan et al., 2022, p. 3). Outbreak narratives offer more than entertainment value or cathartic relief by mediating sense-making attempts and influencing decision-making mechanisms of public imagination during a catastrophic crisis.

While these stories invent and amplify our global perception and understanding of the closed, controlled and locked-down environment, these stories and the captured anxieties of the plague mentality claim their distinctive value through the local determinant markers of the socio-cultural background from which it emerges. Reverting back to both the discussed passages, one from North America and another from South India, the article marks a central problem of concurrence, which demonstrates a clear violation of the right of the dead body to afford a decent burial/cremation. In the case of Morrow’s anecdote, it is “the corpses of the wealthy that were carted off unattended, to be shovelled under without ceremony or prayer”, whereas, in the case of Ananthamurthy’s *Samskara*, it is the corpse of Naranappa, a high-caste Brahmin which suffers exclusion due to the ethical dilemmas of Brahminism. In both situations, the dead bodies suffer alienation from their own community despite displaying high social currency when they were alive and able. While the epidemiological grounds of Philadelphia advance death anxiety amidst its population, the closed utopic spaces of Durvasapura’s agrahara incite both death and caste anxiety amongst its residents. In fact, it is the cultural/moral anxiety caused by the spectres of caste that restricts the rite for the dead man Naranappa in the novel *Samskara*. The article observes this act of denial of funeral rites/rights as eventually forcing a conjuration of the dead upon the living—a phenomenon of the haunting of the spectres.

### **Death Anxiety: Ontology of the Dead**

The deadness of Naranappa’s body is what keeps the novel’s narrative tension alive. The grotesque transformation of the decadent body undergoing *rigor mortis* is not simply metamorphic but metaphoric in nature. The Latin phrase *rigor mortis* which translates as “stiffness of death” makes relevance here, in and out of its corporeal limits, where Naranappa’s body is depicted to have a stifling and stiffening impact on the whole economy and ecology of Durvasapura. In forensic pathology, *rigor mortis* is considered in order to estimate the time of death. The repetitive imagery of the dead body and its graphic representation sensitises this mortifying phenomenon for the readers indicating both the lapse of time and the increasing exposure to the threat of contagion. The proximity of a dead body and the awareness of its putrefaction further generate a mortality salience amongst the community members surrounding

the entity that is *no longer*. The experience of living with death is portrayed in multiple ways in the novel where it not only refers to the spatial closeness of the deceased (living with the dead) but also indicates a temporal limitation of one's own finitude in being (living towards death). It further extends to imply the metaphorical condition of living with Death (Venkatesan et al., 2022 p.3) itself as enforced by the epidemic crisis at the end of the novel. However, it is the dead body which acts as a trigger button that releases an array of anxiety onto the immune system of the larger body politic to combat the anticipations of future crises. Microbial invasions reflect a war-like undertone as in an occurrence of *coup d'état* which nudges a correlation between the immuno-pathological and socio-political frameworks of our quotidian life. Such enactments of defensiveness exhibited by the immunity of our body politic become a subject of research especially to understand the types of immune responses generated in the socio-political discourse apart from the biological one. It is the same defensive nature of immunity that explains the indifference and deference expressed by the Brahmins of Durvasapura in cremating the dead body of Naranappa, a fellow Brahmin. Jayagopalan (2022) notes this deferred denial of acknowledging Naranappa's death as "human death" as "being ridden by the nervousness (of remaining a Brahmin if the rites of this cremation are carried out)". Ananthamurthy writes:

The news of death spread like a fire to the other ten houses of the agrahara. Doors and windows were shut, with children inside. By god's grace, no brahmin had yet eaten. Not a human soul there felt a pang at Naranappa's death, not even women and children. Still in everyone's heart *an obscure fear, an unclean anxiety* [emphasis added]. Alive, Naranappa was an enemy; dead, a preventer of meals; as a corpse, a problem, a nuisance. (p. 9)

The narrator captures the fallout of plague mentality with its very own "obscure fear and unclean anxiety" sieging the space of agrahara. It is at this juncture that the Brahmanical necropolitics comes into play and inverts the paradigms of anxiety unto the unsettled population of plague-ridden Durvasapura. The final regulation of the dead body informs highly about the culture and traditions of any given society—but more importantly, it demonstrates the power dynamics of the particular civilisation. Jean Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* writes that "power is established on death's borders...power is possible only if death is no longer free; only if the dead are put under surveillance, in anticipation of the future confinement of life and its entirety" (1993, p. 130). In the case of Durvasapura's agrahara, the necropower of Brahminism exercises its control over its primary biomedical excess of the plague epidemic—the dead body. The brahmin society's contradicting exhibition of 'control' and 'fear' over a pollutant dead body later explains the seizure of 'biopower'—in the sense of how the dead regulates the quotidian movement of the living, which paralyses at once when confronted with the eventuality of death as announced by Chandri, Naranappa's wife.

The living population ostensibly tries to escape addressing the problem in front by systematically ostracising the body of Naranappa—a symbolic reminder of death, decadence and later the deadly plague. The agrahara rejects the accommodation of death within its boundaries and refuses to offer a dignified cremation with proper sets of rites and rituals. The rejection of the deceased body could be read as one of the examples illustrated in the novel to exemplify the phenomenon of "crisis-induced othering". The vilification or monstrification of the body is a common narrative trope of gothic and horror fiction, which Priscilla Wald (2008) notes how

through means of horror, i.e. through “features designed to provoke disgust, such as the decaying body and oozing innards” (p.190) that outbreak fictions elucidate loss of individuality followed by a loss of humanity as well. U.R. Ananthamurthy writes the contested dead body undergoing the test of time as ‘reeking’, ‘swollen’, ‘grisly’ and ‘deeply disfigured’ (Ananthamurthy, p. 69). The disfiguration of the physical characteristics of Naranappa heightened with the distance of time, also distance him from his personal identity as when he was alive. The loss of identity of the dead is depicted when even his wife Chandri refuses to gaze at the rotting body and deems it abject. The narrator describes Chandri’s contradicting love-hate, or more appropriately love-disgust experience with her dead husband as follows:

‘Ayyo O God, hope no fox or dog has entered the house and done things to the body ...’ She felt distressed, forgot her fears, went in swiftly, found by habit the box of matches in the wall-niche and lit the lantern. A horrid stench. Dead rotting rats. She was grief-stricken that she’d left the body orphaned, unprotected, the body of the man who’d antagonised the whole agrahara for her sake. She went upstairs, thinking, ‘We should have burned some incense and filled the place with sweet smoke.’ The dead body was reeking. The belly was swollen, the face of the dead man was grisly, disfigured. She let out a scream and ran out. Her spirit cried out: what’s up there, that thing, that’s not the man who loved her, no no there’s no connection. (Ananthamurthy, p. 69)

The passage of conducting funeral rites according to the oral or written tradition usually relieves the death anxiety amongst the community members by offering a mourning space; the contradiction of which was expressed throughout *Samskara*—explaining the insular unpreparedness and indecisiveness in treating the caste-inscribed body of Naranappa where it only reveals the loss of humanity over the politics of caste and religiosity. The internalisation of the prescribed age-old mortuary rituals fails to offer a solution to the problems of novel complexity, where it could be observed how it had limited and narrowed the perceptions of the culturally-closed population of Durvasapura. By bringing in a discussion on the finitude of thinking through Vedanta philosophy, Ananthamurthy illustrates the limitations of thoughts which it imposes, finally preoccupying the living with ignorance and obsession over cultural codes of caste stereotypes as follows:

‘Acharya-re, you once said-our Philosophy is called Vedanta, because it’s the end, the anta, of all thinking. Is it ever possible that such Vedanta has no solution for us? Especially when-what do you say-a brahmin corpse lies untouched in the agrahara, thwarting every daily duty for a whole colony of brahmins-what do you say-they can’t eat till they take care of the body--I don’t mean just that-’ (pp. 29-30)

The liminal body of Naranappa slowly transgresses from its physical ontological limits of being to a metaphysical realm of non-being per se. “Death opens the door to metaphysics”, writes Yourgrau (1987, p. 84). This event of closure opens a hauntological gap through which the dead Naranappa haunts and further incites caste anxiety among fellow Brahmins of the agrahara.

### **Caste anxiety: Hauntology of the Dead**

The agrahara maintains its purity, vis-à-vis utopic spatiality and health (Jayagopalan, 2022, p. 142), through its continuous modes of othering and oppressing the imagined “Others” by which it also



exercises its own "imagined immunity" (Wald 2008). The novel illustrates a variety of "Others" constructed through the language and events of the plague. Apart from the plague-ridden body of Naranappa, the catastrophe of the epidemic is seen as a touchstone reference to call out and cast away the untouchable lower caste women like Chandri in the novel. It is Chandri, the wife of Naranappa, who finally dares to finish her husband's cremation and offer him a dignified farewell with a proper funeral. The will to cremate while being both woman and untouchable, as opposed to established tradition and tension, is delivered by the narrator as follows:

She was afraid of going home-she had never seen a dead man's face. If only Naranappa's body had been properly cremated, all her love for him would have welled up in her and she would have dissolved in tears. But now her heart had nothing but fear in it. Only fear, and anxiety. If Naranappa's body didn't get the proper rituals, he could become a tormenting ghost. She had enjoyed life with him for ten years. How could she rest till he got a proper funeral? Her heart revolted. (p. 44)

Chandri's ability to decide and act upon her husband's death and conduct funeral rites is not simply out of sheer wilfulness but also because of her guilt experience. Kumari (2021) writes how family members' ability to mourn and conduct funeral were disabled during outbreaks and subsequent lockdowns, hence reducing the collective act of mourning to an individual level—all leading to shared guilt among the bereaved family members. In other words, Chandri's act of cremating her Brahmin husband could be read as polemical and heretic—which explains her eventual departure from Durvasapura after the cremation. However, the whole process of performing the funeral for her husband's corpse should have ailed her in the grieving process and alleviated the trauma inflicted by caste and caste anxiety. Referring to the absence of Chandri, who emigrated from Durvasapura, the Brahmins who were still indecisive and unaware of the already performed funeral, assumed that "[She] probably ran away to Kundapura, after ruining the entire village", following which they cursed her as "the Mari!" (Ananthamurthy, p. 111)". 'Mari' or 'Mariamma' is the title of local deity of South India who is the "dark goddess of death, plague and [other deadly contagions]" as stated by Ramanujan in the glossary of the novel (p. 156). It is here to be noted how even religiously stern and orthodox Brahmins use and abuse the nomenclature of local deities in association with the lower-caste bodies within the othering discourse of plague.

The caste body of agrahara, thus, reinforces caste homogeneity and seeks to escape threats of pollution/contamination by restricting the mobility of untouchable others by creating a cordon sanitaire which turns inwards here in *Samskara* and eats it from inside, which Jayagopalan reads through Derrida's another concept of "autoimmunity". The moralistic caste anxiety to upkeep the place, and thereby themselves, sacred and sacrosanct is triggered and henceforth played within the novel by the introduction of the plague through the dead Naranappa. Jayagopalan (2022) critically pinpoints the novel's core (in)famously known for its parallel depiction of the decadence of a dead body to that of a decadent body politic of agrahara, as follows:

The Agrahara represents a utopic spatiality of Brahmanical mores of purity and taboo, often concealing its own vices of human othering. Into this spatiality, Ananthamurthy introduces disease as a canvas onto which the community's caste anxieties are cast. Disease, then, is the discursive apparatus through which Ananthamurthy positions to invite moral and philosophical considerations of the Brahmin subject. (p. 142)

The cause of death, which is “plague”, is not revealed to the community for a larger part of the narrative until it reaches its climactic end. It is through a narratological order of events which signals the coming plague that the writer induces death anxiety amongst the constituent members of the novel, who are already predisposed to struggle with caste anxiety and become anxiously wary of their caste position at stake. This discussion on caste anxiety during the outbreak also calls to highlight the aegis of religion, primarily because it motivates normative casteist thinking (Saha, 2020) and reinforces caste anxiety about purity, pollution and touch amongst upper-caste groups. The following passage, as narrated by Durghabhata, another Brahmin folk of Durvasapura, illustrates the dialectic of caste and religious anxiety as imposed by the dead Naranappa as follows:

But our dilemma is something else: is Naranappa, who drank liquor and ate meat, who threw the holy stone into the river, is he a brahmin or is he not? Tell me, which of us is willing to lose his brahminhood here? Yet it's not at all right, I agree, to keep a dead brahmin's body waiting, uncremated.' (Ananthamurthy, p. 19)

The problem of cremation lies in the central question that repeatedly haunts the Brahmins of Durvasapura i.e. is Naranappa a Brahmin or not? According to the caste system, Naranappa is a Brahmin by birth however due to his secular and otherwise anti-Brahmin stance he becomes a paradox. A question mark which haunts Praneshacharya—the representative Brahmin of Durvasapura and even the metonym of the whole Brahminism *per se*. Naranappa's paradoxical position continues and manifests in other directions during his death. Ananthamurthy captures this paradox in the following words, “Alive, Naranappa was an enemy; dead, a preventer of meals; as a corpse, a problem, a nuisance” (p. 3). The problem that ensued by the corpse of Naranappa could be explained by Parry (1994) who categorises the received understanding of death in Hindu society into two types: good death and bad death. Good death takes place on a ‘purified ground’ and it is especially considered good when the dying man hears or chants the name of God at the final moment. On the other hand, all untimely death is considered bad death where one was not prepared for it as in the occurrences of violence, accident or chronic illness. As per this logic, all the deaths that occurred during outbreaks should be considered ‘bad death’ (Kumari, 2021) and so is Naranappa's but, in the novel, it is also illustrated where he ironically achieves good death by chanting the names of Hindu gods during his death in a delirium. The narrator writes:

It was weird. Naranappa, who wouldn't fold his hand before a god any time, had started talking strangely as his fever rose to his brain. As Coma set in, he mumbled, ‘O mother! O God Ramachandra, Narayana!’ Cried out, ‘Rama Rama.’ Holy names. Not words that come out of a sinner's or an outcaste's mouth. (p. 45)

How can one's death be both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ then? Does it cancel out each other or position Naranappa's death in an alien meta-liminal discourse? This condition of ‘paradox’ and position of ‘liminality’ could be read through the lens of what we have discussed previously in this article—the concept of hauntology, which exercises and exorcises another paradox which is something that is ‘no longer’ and ‘not yet’.

### **Doubled Spectres of Dead: Caste Cross Contagion**

Parry (1985) notes that during death, "the soul [is considered to] become a disembodied ghost or *preta*, a marginal state dangerous both to itself and the survivors" (p. 614). The final rites thus attenuate the ghostly state of the dead thus relieving the disembodied into the metaphysical death-worlds of religion. But here, in this article, we decline the 'bodyless-ghost' (Ananthamurthy, p. 51) of Naranappa that troubles and torments the living but instead we address ghosts of another kind –the 'bodyless-ghosts' of caste and contagion. These ghosts haunt the conscience of the living and manifest it rather as a spectre. Gordon (2008) writes that the act of haunting invokes spectres where it is "not the invisible or ineffable excess" (p. 17). Saha (2020) identifies this "hauntological becoming" in the case of caste and also points out that these spectres "cannot be conceptualised without being corporealized" (p. 212). Thus, we identify how in *Samskara*, Ananthamurthy provides us with a docile dead body to conceptualise and concur upon its later defiance toward the dominant power structures through its conjuration of spectres of caste and contagion. As illustrated in detail earlier, the inversion of anxieties also conveys the affective functionality and modality of these doubled spectres. Both contagion and caste are persistent where they sicken a society through their intermittent mode of hauntings like outbreaks or pogroms, respectively.

The twofold spectres exploit the realm of corporeal caste politics, particularly through the sensorial medium of touch. The "touchy" problem of caste in *Samskara* is reiterated time and again by affirming how "only another brahmin has any right to touch his body" (Ananthamurthy, p. 9), while also contradicting itself when brahmins waver to touch the dead Naranappa as it might be "sullyng their brahminhood" (p. 9). Touch, as problematised by Sarukkai, functions through the asymmetric power relations between the toucher and the touched. The problem of touch in caste could be coupled with contagion by tracing the latter word's Latin origin as a conjugation of 'con' and 'tangere' where 'tangere' also signifies touch. All the discussed anxieties generated in response to the outbreak crisis could be traced to the sensorial node of 'touch'—which controls and directs the immunity/purity of the body/politic. The untouchable can be both "the deceased" or "the diseased"; thereby, the term expands from subaltern discourses and reimagines itself in the biopolitical discourse of health humanities. Mbembe (2003) writes on the spectre's "power of reflection" (p. 135), where it reflects the fissures and disruptions in the community and questions the *samskara* of the community of concern. Out of pluralistic meanings of the word 'samskara', here we shall read it as a "preparation, making ready" (concerning contagion) and "the realisation of [outdated and oppressive] past" (about caste) (Ramanujan, p. 139). These spectres "demands a certain responsibility and answerability" (Blanco & Peeren, 2013, p. 33) from humankind through its haunting and thus asks us to prepare ourselves through *samskara* itself, here it also means 'refinement' and 'transformation' (Ramanujan, p. 139), of ourselves and community, in the way we treat both the living and dead, especially during the times of crisis.

## Conclusion

The article owes its thought to Derrida's tribute to Karl Marx and his spectre in his text *Specters of Marx*, where he asserts that even in the post-Soviet era, the spectres of communism will haunt the West beyond its grave. Karl Marx (1859) observes, while talking about social evils and disruptions, that "there must be something rotten in the very core of a social system which increases its wealth without diminishing its misery" (p. 16). In *Samskara*, Ananthamurthy quite

literally positions a rotting dead body, echoing Marx's statement, to allegorise and critique the system of discrimination and stigmatisation prevailing in India. The article overrides the phenomenon of 'living with death' with that of 'living with spectres' where Derrida asserts to engage and communicate with them—ultimately seeking a "communicative action" (Habermas, 1990) from a state of "inaction" and "indecision" in the public sphere. By positioning the dead body within the Indian experience of the outbreak, the article registers the dead as an embodiment of both caste and contagion, which mutually opposes and simultaneously reinforces each other within the socio-political framework of India. The dynamic position held by the spectre, offering itself as an antithesis to the dead, in the oblique of presence/absence calls for action towards social justice, equality and, more importantly, the dignity of both the dead and/amongst the living. It puts forward a requirement to both imagine and reject dominant historical power structures (Shaw 2018), thereby bringing in structural and biopolitical transformations to handle a crisis like a plague or global pandemic. The spectre *cannot not* cease to exist, where it exists to caution and encourage us to be prepared together to face the free play of bodyless-ghosts invoked during outbreaks—a *danse macabre*, which could be otherwise read here as *danse spectre*. The article concludes by noting how the inverted anxieties of caste and contagion as propagated by the corporeal enabled "crisis-induced othering", were ultimately countered by the spectral, transforming it into a "crisis-induced solidarity". Many scholars have also argued that disease ties the human race together (Edson, 1895; Diamond, 1999), affecting it with compassion more than fear. The spectres act as a vector to carry out a similar collective action. A call for action which directs one to live a life of 'Spirit', which in Hegel's words, "is not the life that is frightened of death and spares itself destruction, but the life that assumes death and lives with it" (as quoted in Mbembe, 2019, p. 69). The spectre plagues the psyche of an infected body politic through the epiphenomenon of inversion of anxieties, only to reflect and mediate upon the living population's "*samskara* or [the] lack of it" (Ramanujan, 1976, p. 139).

### **Declaration of Conflicts of Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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