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**Satyashodhak Anna Bhau Sathe :  
A Humanist Philosopher**

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## Index

Sr. No.	Title	Name of Author
1.	<i>Image of Dalit Women in Anna Bhau Sathe's Novels-</i>	Dr. Shaili Gupta/11
2.	<i>The Spirit of Romanticism of Anna Bhau Sathe: A Reading of My Journey to Russia-</i>	Dr.R.A.F.Ajith/ 16
3.	<i>Bhomkya by Anna Bhau Sathe-</i>	Translated by Dr. Sunil R. Raut/22
4.	<i>The role of Annabhau Sathe in Sanyuktt Maharashtra Movement-</i>	Dr. Somnath D. Kadam/ 29
5.	<i>Social Reality in Anna Bhau Sathe's Novel Avadi-</i>	Mr. Shivaji Shankar Kamble/33
6.	<i>A Journey through Annabhau's Literary World: A Bird's Eye View and the Critical Study at a Glance-</i>	<sup>1</sup> Mr. Shivaji V. Kalwale & <sup>2</sup> Mr. Devidas G. Kalwale/45
7.	<i>Satyashodhak Anna Bhau Sathe: A Study of Constitutional Subjects-</i>	Dr. Jadhav V S/53
8.	<i>Representations of Caste in Anna Bhau Sathe's Fakira-</i>	Mr. Gaikwad Rajendra Nivrutti/56
9.	<i>The Feeling of Classless Society in the Novels of Annabhau Sathe-</i>	Mr. Shrikant Jadhav/61
10.	<i>The Relevance of Anna Bhau Sathe-</i>	Mr. Rajesh Kachru Gaikwad/64
11.	<i>Anna Bhau Sathe: The Voice of Subaltern: A Review-</i>	Dr. Bhange Prakash B/ 68
12.	<i>Dalit Consciousness in the Writings of Anna Bhau Sathe-</i>	Dr. Kishor N. Ingole/72
13.	<i>The Struggle for Self Respect in Anna Bhau Sathe's Short Story Sapla (The Trap)-</i>	<sup>1</sup> Dr. D. S. Choudhari & <sup>2</sup> Ms. Manisha B. Ghogre/78
14.	<i>Image of Rustic Women in Anna Bhau Sathe's Novels-</i>	Mr. Kushaba. A. Salunke/82
15.	<i>The Theme of Class and Caste in Annabhau Sathe's Fakira-</i>	Dr. Sonu Lande/87
16.	<i>Social Reformation in Annabhau Sathe Loknattya-</i>	Mr. Chandrakant Salve/92
17.	<i>My Journey to Russia- A Travelogue: New perspective-</i>	Mr. Devade Bhagyashri Baburao/98
18.	<i>Anna Bhau Sathe: A Retrospective Vista-</i>	Mr. Atkare Kailash Ankushrao/102
19.	<i>Anna Bhau Sathe: Maxim Gorky of Marathi Literature-</i>	Ms. Sarika J. Shinde/106



The Struggle for Self Respect in Anna Bhau Sathe's Short Story *Sapla* (*The Trap*)

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**Introduction:**

If we are to describe Anna Bhau Sathe's short stories in a sentence then it will like this that they are the stories of the people struggling for life. These are not the people who would tremble and accept defeat. They all want to live with dignity and at the same time; they also want to win this battle by protesting ferociously with dominating mindset (of the upper castes) (Atre in Upadhye 317). Neela Upadhye has quoted the veteran Marathi writer P. K. Atre's above opinion about Anna Bhau Sathe's short stories. We do find the similar situation in the story *Sapla* (The Trap) but it has more to it.

**Self Respect in Anna Bhau Sathe's Short Story *Sapla*:**

The story progresses from a crisis and ends with a solution to the crisis. The crisis arises when one of the bullocks of a Deshmukh (an upper-caste) dies a few days ago and he requests the *Mahars* to pull it away and bury it, but they spurn to perform the undignified task. This decision turns the seemingly peaceful unspecified village upside down. Angered by this, Dada Deshmukh appeals to the village upper castes to teach a tough lesson to the lower castes especially *Mahars*. His appeal goes unchallenged, as the chore of such kind is assigned to the lower castes especially the *Mahars* by the caste-based social organization of the society. If they are not taught a lesson, he warns "*Mahars* will over-power them" (Sathe 335). The other villagers also fear that if the *Mahars* don't listen, the whole village will be like the *Maharwada*, the ghetto for *Mahars*. The writer underlines that Dada Deshmukh's insistence does not rise chiefly out of fear of any harm the dead bullock could cause to the health and hygiene of the village, but that either he or his brethren will have to perform the task themselves. He convinces the Police Patil (the village police) Datta Patil that the village upper caste people be invited to settle the matter. He quotes the saying that "The cats and dogs are not animals and the *Mahars* and *Mangsars* are not humans" (Sathe 336).

The *Mahars* are called at the *Chawri*, a meeting place where the disputes are resolved. They come to the *chawri* united and led by Hariba. He argues against the demands of the villagers that if they profit from the cattle while they are

living, why they should bury the dead cattle for nothing. He does not want to follow the traditions also as he claims to have understood its inhumanity. He points to the vicious circle that they are mistreated on the basis of their work and they are forced also to do the same work. He hopes to break this vicious circle by this agitation. He also orders that the apparatus of pulling the dead cattle should be broken. This symbolic act, he hopes, will also break the inhuman treatment given to the untouchables. Hariba resolves, "*Hereafter we will not pull the dead cattle. We will die starving, but would never ever touch any dead animal. We are treated like dogs because we pull the dead cattle*" (Sathe 339). The meeting ends unresolved and the upper castes, all excluding the Mahars, decide that they will be excommunicated.

The upper caste labours in the village pull the dead bullock and bury it. The villagers decide that there will be complete isolation and non-cooperation to them. The Mahars are not allowed to graze their cattle and goats in the heath owned by the upper castes. If anybody's goat or cattle is seen grazing in their heath farm, the Mahars were forced to pay the penalty. The untouchables feel trapped. They have to pay the penalties if their goats and cattles are found grazing in the heath farm. Hariba, the mouthpiece of the writer, advises that they should get rid of their goats and cattle if they want to foil the trap of the village upper castes. Before they sell their goats and cattle, Hariba gets a chance to participate in the government auction for the heath ground. He purchases it by highest price and the tables are turned now. The upper castes feel trapped. Their cattle have no place to graze and if they are found grazing in the heath farm, they have to pay the penalties. Ultimately, the upper castes request Hariba to stop this game of check and counter-check. He agrees but with a demand that his brethren be treated humanely. "*He relieves a sigh he had held since innumerable days*" (Sathe 343).

There is a game of foiling a trap by putting forward a counter-trap. The first trap is set by the caste-system which forces the lower caste people to do the undignified work and then condemns them for doing it. It is counter foiled by the untouchables by refusing to do the undignified task. This entraps the upper castes. They counteract this trap with prohibiting their goats and cattle to graze in the heath farm. The untouchables feel entrapped. In their turn to counter-act, they purchase the heath farm and entrap the upper-castes. It ultimately ends in reconciliation between the two parties. The terms of these are decided by the lower castes. Their demands are simple and not many that they be treated like humans. It is concluded in the words of Hariba, "*This soil belongs to all. We all*



*should live like the children of a mother*" (Sathe 343). He also underlines the need for cooperation and coexistence as their lives are inter-dependent.

The story, though it often walks on the brink of suggesting a rebellion, does not point to any rebellion. It rather ends with a solution to the problem with consensus and humanitarian concern. Here, neither the untouchables seem to object for ever to pull the dead cattle, nor the writer. They all agree that if treated with kindness, they will do the same work which they recently saw as undignified. The story only suggests that there can be a rebel to demand a good treatment. The untouchables seem to have reached to a solution to the problem but they just pass by it. When the untouchables own the land, they have their upper hand at the hustle but the writer doesn't stop there. The untouchables carry their old lives but, presumably, with some dignity.

The story finally brings a moral lesson to the anvil. The demands of the lower castes are not of equality of opportunity to nurture their other potentialities but of equality of status. The ethical teaching becomes the motto of the story. Neela Upadhye has rightly observed:

"More than any other Marathi short story writers the ethical concerns find a forceful outlet in the short stories of Anna Bhau Sathe. By sympathetically identifying with the characters and their lives, Anna Bhau's verbal portraits do imbibe human values in the minds of the readers." (Upadhye 318)

The story deals with the struggle of the characters to earn a life of self-interest while keeping the social order as it was. He does not offer an utopian social order where the caste system has completely collapsed. He does not oppose to the distribution of the work on the basis of caste, rather he wants its low dignity and inhuman treatment on the basis of the work should be eradicated. Though he appears to be in line with the ideology which supported the caste-based distribution of work on the grounds that it distributed the work and avoid competition and collision of interests, he is more a realist than an idealist. He gives a clear signal in the story, "Without a township *Maharwada* (Mahar-quarters or ghetto) has no value and without a *Maharwada*, a township has no orderliness" (Sathe 343). The crux of the crisis lies in this age-old casteist saying which denies the human dignity to the lower castes. Dr. Bajrang Korde proposes that the real inspiration behind this story was most probably the agitation called by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to the untouchables that they should stop pulling the dead cattle and they should also stop eating the beef of the dead cattle. However, there were similar instances of occurrences elsewhere also. Rupa Vishwanath gives an instance "In one memorable instance,

*Dalits* in a Trichinopoly village refused to perform demeaning service obligations for the-caste people who employed them, and tensions rose high” (Vishwanath 329). This historical perspective on the story clarifies the question why the untouchables have laid a trap for the upper castes. He also rightly argues that the story has mixture of imagination into the reality (Korde 33-34).

### Conclusion:

Though the message of the story was not to wage an open attack on the discriminatory social order, he subtly points out that they can have an upper hand in this struggle for weighting down power equation to their sides if only they act wisely. He also suggests that the solution does not lie in only the caste-based mindset of the society but in their economic dependence on the upper classes. If only they have means of livelihood, they can argue for their rights on equal terms with the upper castes. The writer does not point towards any casteless society or a society where the untouchables will not be forced to do what they don't want to do. He merely wanted to suggest that the system can be counter-argued in the times when the untouchables had no alternative reality known.

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