

**A Study of Indian Social Structure of Caste: *Bharathipura* by
U. R. Ananthamurthy**

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study the representation of caste in the translated works of the Kannada writer U.R. Ananthamurthy (1932-2014) in the framework of socio-cultural outlook. The people in India are differentiated by gender, religion, tribe, language, caste and class. With these differentiations the problem arises when again the people are differentiated through power, wealth, prestige, income, etc. The term 'caste' plays a major role in the society. Caste are also differentiated by the colour of skin, status, etc. Even today the people have the space by differentiating other people through caste.

Keywords: U. R. Ananthamurthy, *Bharathipura*, Caste, Class, Language, Inferior, Superior, Colour.

Caste System

The paper aims to describe the caste system in the translated works of the Kannada writer U.R. Ananthamurthy (1932-2014) in the framework of socio-cultural outlook. The caste system divides the people into superior and inferior groups with different responsibilities, functions and standards of living. Among the members of the same caste it was a fixed social environment and fostered fellow feeling in the caste system. Untouchability was born out of caste system which is a blot on the Hindu society. The Brahmins were considered as the superior caste in the society. They had their equal power of respect and status in the society. In *Bharathipura*, U. R. Ananthamurthy portrays about the system of upper and lower caste and also how people of lower castes are not treated equal to the upper caste people.

Bharathipura

Bharathipura is not an entirely different story, nor is its protagonist Jagannatha totally different from Praneshacharya. *Bharathipura* is the altered locale of the *Agrahara* of *Samskara* with its own hierarchical structure and sacred order. Jagannatha happens to be the modern Indian because of his western, rational education, and liberal notions of justice and equality by inheritance. If Praneshacharya "becomes" an alien in "*Samskara*", Jagannatha's "being" as liberal is by its very conviction alien to the land he originates

from. Ananthamurthy locates the experience of ‘alienness’ in one’s own land because of one’s intellectual and moral choices. Jagannatha has to ‘find’ his authentic self as an ‘outsider’ and is a contrast to Praneshacharya who has to renounce his status as a prominent ‘insider’ and has to ‘discover’ his authenticity as an ‘alien’, the experience of which is actually the burden of history imposed upon him. Jagannatha’s ‘alienness’ is an individual choice made in the face of history. While the ‘sacred’ collapses for Praneshacharya forcing him to seek his authenticity by moving out of the traditional space and break its ‘sacred’ order to seek his authentic self. The paradoxical nature of the historical situation is what Ananthamurthy’s text portrays as the “irreconcilable duality” of the socio-cultural condition and the contradictions of the individual existential self.

Jagannatha

Jagannatha’s attempt to desecrate the sacred *shaligrama* is his only moral choice to establish equality and justice in a caste-ridden society which dehumanizes both the upper caste people and the untouchables. The struggle to bring “conscientization” to the untouchables by forcing them to “touch and defile” the *shaligrama* is not an act of iconoclasm as many social scientists have argued. Describing Jagannatha as an iconoclast is the construction of theoreticians who do not comprehend the enormous difficulties, challenges and intense agony of conscientious individuals who need to find modes of ‘ethical action’ ends up by only reconstructing and reinforcing the dehumanizing caste hierarchy of the community and, further, by consolidating its notion of the ‘sacred’. “*Bharathipura*” is a great classic dealing with the paradoxical dilemma of the liberal Indian. (Ananthamurthy, Ed. Chakravarthy Preface 13-14).

Susheela Punitha, the translator of *Bharathipura*, is a teacher and has taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses in English language and literature.

***Bharathipura*’s Focus**

Bharathipura focuses on questions of caste, untouchability, traditions, beliefs, relationship and modernity. In a book *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus* by Michael Moffatt, the author states the ritual roles of the Brahmins by analysing different untouchable castes in different parts of India.

The kinship patterns said to be found most “purely” among the Untouchables than the opposed patterns of the Brahmins (Gough 1956: 826-27). This fact suggests that the diversity in Gough’s data is found more clearly at the very top of the system, between the Brahmins (and, where they are a different caste, the dominant caste) and everyone else, and not near the bottom of the system, between the main village castes and the untouchables (294).

Brahmins are the most superior class in India. There are several divisions within Brahmin communities. In *Bharathipura*, the Holeyaru has greater power than the Brahmin to humble themselves before God.

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Bharathipura reads more like Raja Rao's *Serpent and Rope*, negotiating Eastern values with Western values. The mainstream society is described with an ironic, mildly satiric tone, looking at India with western eyes.

Bharathipura reveals U. R. Ananthamurthy's concern with moving beyond caste and class interests. It handles the intertwining themes, the master work will appeal to readers all over the places, chiefly students and teachers of Indian Writing, Comparative Literature, and Translation and Cultural Studies.

Break the Burden of the Past

Bharathipura is about modernization, a growing economy, socialism, and the struggle of individuals to move beyond their caste and class interests. The novel centres around an enlightened modern Indian who wants to break free, get rid of his personal burdens, and, in order to do so, has to do scandalous things, which also means desecrating many sacred things that have come down from the past. What is of importance in all these is that such an urge to break the burden of the past leads to a tragic, ironical situation. When Jagannatha, the protagonist, driven by the intense impulse to break the oppressive caste hierarchy of his small town, decides to act by forcing the untouchables, the polluted ones in the upper-caste dominated society, to gain their liberation by touching a sacred object and polluting it, what follows are strange reversals, irrational developments, and an unexpected twists of circumstances, by which the object becomes more sacred and powerful than it was earlier, leaving the untouchables more vulnerable than before. Jagannatha's moral act is incorporated into the deeper illogical and arbitrary patterns of belief and irrational systems of a cultural order that generates power, whenever necessary, to subvert whatever challenge its authority.

Ananthamurthy's work is a fascinating revelation of how the contemporary world recreates and reconstructs the past to protect its hierarchical structure. The complex dialectics created by social systems, whether of the past or the present, is what every fictional work of Ananthamurthy journeys from the present to dwell in the past in most of his works. For him the return to the past in most of his works and crucial aspects of understanding the present, which, as one ought to know, is a legacy of the past. As Camus brilliantly put it, nostalgia is a rebellion against an oppressive reality and an ontological search for the essence of one's being.

Samskara and Bharathipura

The first two novels of Ananthamurthy *Samskara* and *Bharathipura* deals with the existential predicament of two individuals located at different points of time and the moral choices they have to make to gain some authenticity of the self. The two transgress their social orders if they are to arrive at any acceptable notion of their being. The two works, in different ways, are open negotiations with an Indian reality that has, apparently, moved from the past into the present in a linear manner. But Ananthamurthy's works draw our attention to the essential anachronistic nature of the present, also described as 'the

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modern', which, for a sensitive mind, carries many traces of the traditions of the past, making it impossible to separate the two. Such a complex philosophical understanding of the element of anachronism embedded in cultures and societies precisely what lends a metaphorical/ allegorical dimension to his works. Beyond a certain point, social realism makes way for the symbolic in his fiction.

Practice of Untouchability

Bharathipura is about the practice of untouchability in a traditional society that is evolving into modernity through new economic forces brought in only by a certain class of people. Hence, cultural and economic practices are controlled by the ruling class, which has appropriate Gods and Temples too. To break one of them inevitably means breaking the others, simultaneously. Jagannatha cannot confront the caste system without shattering the economic order of the feudal town and desecrating its sacred symbols.

No Alternative Is Offered

While depicting all these, Ananthamurthy does not offer modernity as a great alternative, for it carries in its framework greater dehumanizing forces a theme worked out in his third and fourth novels, *Awasthe* (1978) and *Bhava* (1994). The modern democracy is as manipulative as the tyranny of feudal societies. It is for this reason that the works of Ananthamurthy remain ambivalent and open-ended when they juxtapose tradition and modernity, the rural and the urban, the feudal caste order and the depersonalized cosmopolis. For contemporary Indian reality is an odd mixture of all these irreconcilable elements that merge, fuse into one another, yet, at the same time, diverge and contradict one another. The ambivalence in the writer operates as the only legitimate metaphor that can mirror all the contradictions, dualities, and paradoxes of Indian life as perfect antinomies.

And it is through Ananthamurthy's ambivalent symbols that the complexities of Indian social and political realities reveal themselves fully. *Bharathipura* is a major work that decades after its publication carries all the vital and subtle resonances of a society and a culture that seem to engender greater contradictions and more complex dichotomies with the passage of time (Murthy, *Bharathipura* n.pge).

Thematically More Comprehensive

The second novel, *Bharathipura* (1973), set in the contemporary social-political situation of freedom struggle, is comparatively simpler and thematically more comprehensive novel. The theme is not of a community but of a nation, viz, the freedom struggle and upliftment of the Harijans. The protagonist Jagannatha is also the alter ego of the novelist. Like the author, he is also educated in England and returns to his village at the time of freedom movement. *Bharathipura*, the fictitious village, is the microcosm of India like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* of R. K. Narayan's *Malgudi*. Ironically, the village is full of hypocrites, illiterates and ignorant people.

Jagannatha, the central figure, is a sort of a Gandhian like that of Raja Rao's Murthy in *Kanthapura*—the same clad in homespun dhoti. The main narrative is interspersed with the letters received by him, now and then, from Margaret, his English beloved who finally marries someone, betraying the protagonist. Jagannatha, being away from her, involves in the upliftment of the Harijans. He hands over the cotton dress to half-naked Harijans to make them look more civilized; but it is implied in the context of the novel that they cannot be civilized because they wear it the wrong way around. Another heroic feat is he teaches them the alphabet and makes them aware of the importance of literacy and cleanliness. By giving them education, he attempts to remove the fear of the upper caste people and God from their minds. As an atheist, he thinks— “Unless we destroy God, we will never be creative. We are all like embryo in the womb of God. We remain unborn. We have not been caught up in the churning of history, and we should be” (p.10).

The most important episode in the end of the novel is Jagannatha's taking them into the local temple of Lord Shiva as they are forbidden to enter the temple and touch. A fear of defilement of the holy temple lurks in the minds of the Harijans. On the day before Jagannatha's leading the Harijans for entering the temple, Ganesh, the disciple of Jagannatha, goes to the temple at night and picks up the lingam and throws into the river. Next day morning they enter the temple, but they find no lingam there in the sanctum sanctorum. It is a kind of situational irony with which the novel ends. There is ring of genial humour around their heroic feat and Jagannatha's idealistic movement (Prasad 80-81).

In a book, *Rethinking Indian Political Institutions* by Crispin Bates, Subho Basu explains about the Ananthamurthy's Karnataka life as the writer's main interest. Here is his novel *Bharathipura*, which shows a wide range of social interaction among caste groups in the village of the novel's title. The novel was written in Kannada in the 1970s while the author was staying in a village in Malenad. A socialist of the Lohiate movement, Ananthamurthy travelled extensively in that area during electoral campaigns and campaigns for the abolition of landlordism.

In *Bharathipura* the young Brahmin landlord in the village comes back from university in the U.K. and decides that the ex-untouchables in the village will not act to escape their low status until the village God is demystified for them. He endeavors to mobilize them to enter the temple of the god and touch the icon (51). The writer's language of honour and respect in political discourse in Karnataka can overlap with conceptions of civil intercourse that touched on notions of community belonging. However, a notable pattern is revealed in these social exchanges. The respect relations in *Bharathipura* function to maintain the local dominance of the protagonist's plantation-owning Brahmin family. Examining major sources for the generation of values and practices of honour and respect, one finds that these values and practices maintain a structure of relationships which institutionalizes inequality. However, the inequalities can be and often are challenged (53).

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An upper-class person has a special identity in the society. In the novel Ananthamurthy has specifically stated about Hinduism “Brahmin boys, a tuft of hair on their heads and a scrap of dhoti wrapped round their waists, crowd around it” (5-6). Rayaru opened the newspaper to read about Neelakantaswami of the Mysore Socialist Party would participate in the protest or not. “This fellow protested against the Socialist Party because the secretary was a Brahmin and now he has set up his own party, the MSP or the Mysore Socialist Party” (147). No one can say whether Lingayat will join the Congress if not a man called Ranga Rao will join the party. “The name sounds Brahmin but he’s actually a Gowda. I hear he can’t stand Brahmins” (147).

In traditional society the practice of untouchability through certain class of people evolves the new economic force. In *Bharathipura*, Jagannatha, who revolves around the modern India in order to get rid of his personal burdens commit a scandalous act. Violent and unexpected events follow Jagannatha’s attempts to revolutionize everyone and everything by linking his own transformation to the changes he wishes to orchestrate. With its display of literary discipline, the novel exposes the complexities of the caste system and the myth of social justice in modern India. Further, the novel brings to light how the contemporary world recreates and reconstructs the past to protect hierarchical structures prevalent across societies, and also portrays the altering destinies of individuals and communities.

In a book *Contemporary World Fiction: A Guide to Literature in Translation* by Juris Dilevko, Keren Dali, Glenda Garbutt, Jagannatha is described as a rich landholding atheist who has experienced the racing effects of modernity and progress while visiting England. When he returns to his small village in Southern India, he wants to implement Western-style social and cultural reforms, focusing on making life better for the most poverty-stricken of his fellow citizens. But his efforts are marred by the persistence of caste hierarchies (139).

Aspects of Translation

The places in which the novel is set are an indication of the felicity with which English carries the story forward. The parts of the story based in England and Bangalore flow as fluently in English as they do in Kannada. In fact, Raghava Puranik, a character who lives in the virtual England he has built for himself in *Bharathipura*, speaks only in English much to the translator’s delight. And the expression in English that Jagannatha and his friends use act as signposts to the translation.

It is while translating the major part of the story set in small-town *Bharathipura*, a Brahmin stronghold, that English bends under the strain of the cultural signified for which there are no equivalent signifiers in English. And, so, familiar expressions like mantra and linga have been retained with footnotes to help along the way. But the computer – compliant spelling of ‘dhoti’ for the length of cloth worn by men to cover the lower part of the body had to be changed to *dhoti* as there is a phonetic difference between the two words in Kannada; the former.

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The choice was more deliberate in retaining Holeyaru for its connotative value. Though ‘Dalit’ has a modern pan-Indian political content in referring to the depressed castes, the socio-cultural Kannada term ‘Holeyaru’ has been retained as it refers to the community that cleaned toilets, for the story is about them. With it comes its variants used in the text, Holey (singular) and Holathi (feminine). In this context, human waste had to carry the necessary revulsion.

And there was a problem with *gudi*, a touching instance of polysemy in the context of the theme. The places in which the novel is set are an indication of the felicity with which English carries the story forward. The parts of the story based in England and Bangalore flow as fluently in English as they do in Kannada. In fact, RaghavaPuranik, a character who lives in the virtual England, he has built for himself in *Bharathipura*, speaks only in English much to the translator’s delight. And the expression in English that Jagannatha and his friends use the act as signposts to the translation.

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And there was a problem with *gudi*, a touching instance of polysemy in the context of the theme. *Gudi* means ‘temple’ and it also means ‘the dwelling of the Holey’, and yet the word could not be retained. To avoid confusion, it had to be translated as ‘temple’ or ‘hut’, whichever was relevant in the context (Murthy, *Bharathipuraxxiv-xxvi*).

Ananthamurthy’s novel *Bharathipura* (1973) is one such act of resistance and confrontation. The translation of *Bharathipura*, his second novel, comes long after the fairly well-known translation of his first novel *Samskara*(1965). This introduction attempts to locate the work in its specific socio-cultural context on the conviction that creative writing unfolds experiential dimensions that are in no way inferior to the epistemological elements that the social sciences claim to contain while ‘objectively’ studying societies and cultures (Murthy, *Bharathipura xviii*).

Dipankar Gupta’s edited work *Caste in Question: Identity or hierarchy* in a Chapter on “Introduction: The certitudes of caste: When identity trumps hierarchy” explains on the hierarchical essence of the caste system. “Caste identities will find novel ways of expressing themselves, now in politics, now in economics, now in capricious expressions of hierarchy, justice and even equality”(xx). Caste identity is not something that is found either in democratic politics or market economics. Caste identities flourish only in villages.

If the Brahman notion of hierarchy were really as definitive as scholars and members of the literati often tend to assume. The fact that Brahmadeya lands were given rich patrons has persuaded some believe that the priestly caste had an unusual hold over the minds of Hindus in practically every aspect of social life (xii).

Caste identities that are in no way embarrassed by Brahmanical renditions. Caste is faring in India by undergoing rapid changes both economically and politically.

Sripathi Rao Brought the dailies published in Bangalore. He read all the letters concerning Jagannathan printed in the reader's column. But Jagannathan was not interested in praising him. He had not been successful in opening his mind to the Holeyaru. In one of the letter condemning Jagannathansaid that,

'This insistence on deliberately hurting the sentiments of the upper class through the entry of the Harijans into the temple is far from Gandhiji's philosophy...' Another had argued in bombastic words about the difference between a devotee of God expressing his love for the Harijans by wanting to bring them into the temple and an atheist influenced by Western ideas wanting to destroy Hinduism (143).

U.R. Ananthamurthy brings to his material considerable gifts as a technician. His deft shifting between third-person narration and the protagonist's inner monologue allows us to experience the novel's world simultaneously from within and without. Although Susheela Punitha's translation is often uneven, it releases into English this work of formidable interpretative power by a writer who warrants the title, as much as Amitav Ghosh or Vikram Seth, of India's greatest living novelist.

This novel can be read as an allegory of the restless forcing open of a door in Indian history, its power resides in the way its universal ideas are worked out through the frame of the local. We never forget, we are in a single small town, thinking our way through the particular names, histories and legends that inflect its thought.

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