

Reading U. R. Ananthamurthy: A Review of Critical Scholarship on *Samskara*, *Bharathipura*, *Bhava* and *Avasthe*

Man Singh^{1*}, Dr. Navin Kumar Yadav²

1 Research Scholar, MGM PG College, Sambhal, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Rohilkhand University, Bareilly (U.P.), India

drmansinghadvocate@gmail.com

2 Assistant Professor of English at Udai Pratap College Varanasi, 221002, U.P, India

Abstract: U. R. Ananthamurthy (1932–2014) is among the most widely read and translated writers of the Kannada Navya (modernist) movement, and his novels have generated a large body of criticism in English. This review surveys that scholarship across four novels available in English translation: *Samskara* (Kannada 1965; English 1976), *Bharathipura* (1973; 2010), *Avasthe* (1978; 2020) and *Bhava* (1994; 1998). The review is organised thematically and textually. It maps six recurrent lines of inquiry: caste and ritual purity, religious orthodoxy and ethical authority, tradition and modernity, individual consciousness and existential crisis, political ideology and agency, and narrative technique. It then examines the theoretical frameworks that critics have brought to the novels, including Dumont's structural account of hierarchy, Ambedkar's critique of graded inequality, Gramscian hegemony, Foucauldian discipline, existentialism, narratology and postcolonial hybridity. The review finds that criticism is heavily concentrated on *Samskara*, that *Bharathipura* is read chiefly through caste and reform, and that *Bhava* and *Avasthe* remain comparatively under-studied. Most studies treat one novel or one framework at a time. The review closes by identifying five gaps: the absence of comparative, career-spanning readings; limited attention to how social structures become internal psychological experience; under-examined gender relations beyond *Samskara*; little work on translation as a mediating factor; and scarce pedagogical or applied research. These gaps define an agenda for interdisciplinary study of Ananthamurthy's fiction.

Keywords: U. R. Ananthamurthy; Kannada Navya movement; *Samskara*; *Bharathipura*; *Bhava*; *Avasthe*; caste; tradition and modernity; existentialism; literature review

1. INTRODUCTION

Few Indian novelists writing in a regional language have attracted as sustained a critical response in English as U. R. Ananthamurthy. A Jnanpith laureate (1994) and Padma Bhushan recipient (1998), he was a professor of English, a vice-chancellor, and a public intellectual whose fiction repeatedly returned to the Brahminical communities of the Malnad region of Karnataka in which he was raised. His first novel, *Samskara*, became a modern classic after

A. K. Ramanujan's English translation appeared in 1976, and it continues to anchor discussions of caste, ritual and modernity in Indian literature.

The scholarship on Ananthamurthy is large but uneven. It spans journal articles, edited volumes, doctoral theses and translators' introductions, and it draws on literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and postcolonial theory. Because these studies are scattered across disciplines and are often limited to one novel, the field lacks a consolidated account of what has been established, which frameworks have proved productive, and where the open questions lie.

This review addresses that need for four novels that together span Ananthamurthy's career as a novelist: *Samskara*, *Bharathipura*, *Avasthe* and *Bhava*. It asks three questions:

1. What themes and interpretive problems has criticism identified in each novel?
2. Which theoretical frameworks have critics used, and with what results?
3. What gaps remain, and what kind of study would address them?

The review is drawn from the literature survey undertaken for a doctoral thesis on the representation of Indian society and culture in these four novels (Singh, 2026), supplemented and verified against published sources.

2. SCOPE AND METHOD OF THE REVIEW

This is a narrative, thematic review rather than a systematic review with database counts. Sources were included if they (a) offered a sustained critical reading of at least one of the four novels, (b) supplied a theoretical framework that critics have applied to them, or (c) provided contextual material on the Navya movement or on translation. Primary texts were read in their standard English translations: Ramanujan's *Samskara* (1976), Susheela Punitha's *Bharathipura* (2010), Judith Kroll's *Bhava*, translated with the author (1998), and Narayan Hegde's *Avasthe* (2020).

The material is organised in four stages. Section 3 sets out the literary and translational context. Section 4 reviews scholarship novel by novel. Section 5 examines the theoretical frameworks in use. Section 6 synthesises the cross-cutting themes, and Section 7 identifies research gaps.

Two limitations should be stated. First, the review covers English-language criticism; Kannada criticism, which is extensive, is referred to only where it has been translated or summarised in English. Second, a good deal of recent criticism appears in small or unindexed journals of variable quality; such work is cited only where its argument could be verified.

3. CONTEXT: ANANTHAMURTHY, THE NAVYA MOVEMENT AND TRANSLATION

Critics consistently place Ananthamurthy within the Navya phase of Kannada literature, which from the 1950s turned away from the romantic idealism and nationalist didacticism of the preceding Navodaya writers. Navya fiction favoured psychological interiority, moral ambiguity, irony and formal experiment, and it absorbed European modernism and existentialism while addressing specifically Indian social conflicts (Tirumalesh, 2005). Ananthamurthy's own essays, notably "Search for Identity: A Viewpoint of a Kannada Writer" (1979), frame his work as an attempt to write from inside a tradition he could neither fully accept nor abandon.

This double position is the starting point for much of the criticism. Ramanujan's afterword to *Samskara* (1976) reads the novel as a contemporary reworking of classical Hindu themes, in which the title itself carries the senses of rite, refinement and transformation. Parthasarathy (1994) extends this into a reading of *Samskara* as a narrative of "the passing of the Brahmin tradition," while Meenakshi Mukherjee's work on realism and the Indian novel (1985) supplies a broader frame for how regional fiction registered social change.

Translation is a second contextual concern. Ananthamurthy's international reputation rests almost entirely on English versions, and the four novels reached English readers at very different times: *Samskara* within eleven years of its Kannada publication, *Bharathipura* and *Avasthe* only after more than three and four decades respectively. This uneven history partly explains why criticism clusters around *Samskara*. The recent translation of *Avasthe* has prompted renewed attention to its political themes, with reviewers describing it as timely for contemporary Indian democracy (Scroll.in, 2020). Yet the effect of translation on how these novels are read has seldom been studied directly.

4. SCHOLARSHIP ON THE FOUR NOVELS

4.1 *Samskara*: ritual, caste and the crisis of authority

Samskara is by far the most discussed of the four novels, and the scholarship is mature enough to have produced a dedicated volume, U. R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara: A Critical Reader* (Baral, Rao and Rath, 2005). The novel's premise is well known: the death of Naranappa, a Brahmin who has flouted the rules of the Durvasapura agrahara, leaves the community unable to decide who may perform his funeral rites, while his corpse decays and plague spreads.

Three interpretive clusters dominate. The first reads the agrahara as a microcosm of Brahminical social order in which ritual purity determines status, and the undisposed body as a symbol of collective moral paralysis. Studies in this vein argue that the novel exposes caste as something reproduced through everyday belief and practice rather than imposed from outside. The second cluster centres on Praneshacharya, the learned ascetic whose encounter with Chandri destabilises an identity built on scriptural mastery. Critics such as Raval (2005) and Radhakrishnan (2005) read his journey as a cultural impasse: the shift from asking what scripture prescribes to asking how an individual should act when scripture gives no answer. The third cluster reads the novel dialogically, noting how Naranappa's heterodox voice gradually penetrates the Acharya's consciousness.

Gender is a smaller but important strand. Pillai (2011) argues that the novel's treatment of lower-caste women such as Chandri reproduces as well as critiques a traditional association of women with desire, and Manavalli (2001) reads *Samskara* alongside Ananthamurthy's short fiction to show how caste and desire intersect in the figure of the gendered other. These readings complicate an earlier consensus that treated the novel's critique of orthodoxy as straightforwardly emancipatory.

4.2 *Bharathipura*: reform, the temple and internalised caste

Bharathipura (1973) follows Jagannatha, an England-educated Brahmin landlord who returns to his town and tries to lead the Holey community into the Manjunatha temple. Criticism has focused almost entirely on caste and reform. Critics read the temple as a centre of cultural authority rather than a merely religious site, so that control of entry becomes control of social legitimacy.

The most productive insight in this literature concerns the limits of reform. Several studies note that the Holeyas' hesitation to enter the temple reveals caste as psychological conditioning, not only as external exclusion, and that Jagannatha's own anxiety shows the reformer to be shaped by the privilege he opposes. Comparative work on *Samskara* and *Bharathipura* describes the two novels as testing two different routes to the annihilation of caste, both of which fail within the narrative. Studies of subaltern representation credit the novel with giving voice to Dalit characters, while also noting that the narrative perspective remains that of the upper-caste reformer.

4.3 *Avasthe*: political allegory and the ailing body

Avasthe (1978) is narrated largely through the memories of Krishnappa Gowda, a peasant leader and socialist politician who lies paralysed as a political crisis unfolds around him. Criticism in English is still thin, largely because the novel had no widely available English translation until 2020. Existing readings emphasise its allegorical character: the paralysed body stands for the exhaustion of post-independence political idealism, and the novel stages competing ideological positions including Gandhian, socialist, Marxist and parliamentary politics. Reviewers of the translation have stressed its relevance to contemporary concerns about corruption, authoritarianism and the survival of integrity in public life (Scroll.in, 2020). The role of memory and non-linear narration in constructing political consciousness has been noted but not systematically analysed.

4.4 *Bhava*: being, becoming and the question of origins

Bhava (Kannada 1994; English 1998) is the least studied of the four. Its plot turns on uncertain paternity across three generations: Vishwanath Shastri, a reciter of Harikatha who believes he killed his wife Saroja; Dinakar, a television actor who may be his son; and Prasad, whose father may be either Dinakar or his friend Narayan Tantri. The title's double sense of "being" and "becoming" has been the main interpretive key. Readers and critics describe the novel as moving from mystery toward metaphysical reflection, with guilt, desire and the search for origins left deliberately unresolved. Existing commentary gestures toward existential and Advaitic readings but rarely develops them into sustained argument, and the novel's relation to Ananthamurthy's earlier social fiction remains largely unexplored.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IN THE SCHOLARSHIP

Critics have brought a wide range of theory to Ananthamurthy's fiction. The frameworks cluster into four families, each suited to particular novels and each with characteristic blind spots.

Structural and critical theories of caste. Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980) supplies the most common sociological vocabulary: hierarchy, purity and pollution, and interdependence. It explains well why the Durvasapura Brahmins cannot act, since ritual status rather than economic power is at stake. Its weakness is that it presents hierarchy as a coherent system accepted from within. B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* provides the corrective, treating caste as graded inequality sustained by religious sanction and calling for its destruction rather than reform. Ambedkarite readings are especially apt for *Bharathipura*, where the question of whether temple entry can end untouchability echoes Ambedkar's own scepticism about temple-entry campaigns. D. R. Nagaraj's *The Flaming Feet* (2010) offers a further vantage point from within Kannada intellectual history.

Theories of power and hegemony. Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (1971) helps explain why caste hierarchy persists without constant coercion: it is experienced as legitimate, traditional or sacred. Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power (1977) shifts attention to bodies, spaces and conduct, and is well suited to the spatial regulation of the Holeyas in *Bharathipura* and to the body as a site of politics in *Avasthe*.

Existential and ethical philosophy. Jean-Paul Sartre's emphasis on freedom, responsibility and bad faith has been applied to Praneshacharya's crisis and, less often, to *Bhava* and *Avasthe*. Critics also draw on Camus and Kierkegaard for alienation and anxiety. The persistent risk here is importing a European vocabulary without asking how it interacts with Indian concepts such as *samsara*, *vairagya* (detachment) and *bhava* itself.

Narratology and postcolonial theory. Gérard Genette's categories of order, duration and focalisation (1980) are used for the free indirect narration of *Samskara* and the memory-driven structure of *Avasthe*. Bakhtinian readings treat *Samskara* as polyphonic. Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity (1994) and Ashis Nandy's account of the colonised self (1983) are used to read Jagannatha as a figure caught between liberal modernity and inherited privilege.

The main pattern across these frameworks is specialisation. Sociological theory is applied to the caste novels, existentialism to the introspective ones, and narratology to questions of form. Few studies combine them.

6. SYNTHESIS: CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Read together, the scholarship shows six recurring concerns, but each has been developed mainly in relation to one or two novels. Table 1 summarises where critical attention has fallen.

Table 1. Distribution of critical attention across the four novels

Novel (Kannada / English)	Dominant critical themes	Most-used frameworks	Relative volume of criticism	Under-explored aspects
<i>Samskara</i> (1965 / 1976)	Caste and purity; ritual authority; Praneshacharya's crisis; gender and desire	Dumont; Ambedkar; existentialism; Bakhtin; feminist criticism	Extensive; dedicated critical reader	Links to later novels; translation of ritual idiom
<i>Bharathipura</i> (1973 / 2010)	Temple entry; limits of reform; internalised caste; subaltern voice	Ambedkar; Gramsci; Foucault; subaltern studies	Moderate	Gender; the reformer's hybridity; narrative form
<i>Avasthe</i> (1978 / 2020)	Political disillusion; the body as allegory; ideology and compromise	Political allegory; existential ethics	Limited; growing since translation	Memory and narrative time; caste in politics
<i>Bhava</i> (1994 / 1998)	Being and becoming; guilt; paternity and origins	Existentialism; Advaitic philosophy (mostly implicit)	Sparse	Sustained philosophical reading; relation to social fiction

Three syntheses emerge from this distribution. First, on **caste**, the criticism has moved from reading it as an external institution toward reading it as internalised consciousness shared by oppressor and oppressed, but this insight has been developed for *Samskara* and *Bharathipura*

only. Second, on **tradition and modernity**, critics agree that Ananthamurthy refuses a simple binary: modernity does not replace tradition, and reformers remain shaped by what they reject. Third, on **form**, there is broad agreement that ambiguity, symbolism, interior narration and open endings are not decorative but carry the social critique, although this claim is usually asserted rather than demonstrated through close formal analysis.

The literature also implies, without quite stating, a developmental arc in Ananthamurthy's career: from ritual and caste (*Samskara*), through reform (*Bharathipura*) and politics (*Avasthe*), to existential inwardness (*Bhava*). Testing that arc is a task for comparative work.

7. RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The review identifies five gaps.

1. **Comparative, career-spanning study.** Most criticism isolates single novels. There is little sustained work reading the four novels as stages in one developing project, which would allow claims about continuity and change in Ananthamurthy's treatment of society to be tested rather than assumed.
2. **From structure to consciousness.** The insight that caste is internalised has been developed for two novels. It has not been extended to show how political failure in *Avasthe* or uncertain origins in *Bhava* are likewise social structures lived as private experience.
3. **Gender beyond *Samskara*.** Feminist readings are concentrated on Chandri and Bhagirathi. Women in *Bharathipura* and *Bhava*, and the gendering of political life in *Avasthe*, remain largely unexamined.
4. **Translation as mediation.** Given that the English reception depends on four translators working across five decades, the absence of translation-studies work on these novels is striking. Questions of how ritual idiom, caste terms and dialect are rendered bear directly on how critics read caste and religion.
5. **Applied and pedagogical research.** Many studies claim that the novels are valuable for teaching critical thinking, cultural literacy and ethics, but almost none test this claim empirically, for example through classroom or reader-response studies.

Addressing these gaps calls for interdisciplinary designs that combine sociological and philosophical frameworks with close narratological analysis, and that read the novels comparatively. Reception studies, digital methods such as character-network analysis, and comparisons with writers like Premchand, Mahasweta Devi and Mulk Raj Anand would further extend the field.

8. CONCLUSION

Criticism on Ananthamurthy has established him as a writer who critiques caste and orthodoxy from within the social world he depicts, who refuses to set tradition and modernity against each other as simple opposites, and whose formal choices carry his social argument. These are substantial achievements. But the field is lopsided: *Samskara* has a critical literature of its own, while *Bhava* and *Avasthe* have barely begun to receive sustained attention, and the frameworks applied to each novel rarely meet.

The most promising direction is comparative and interdisciplinary: reading the four novels together, tracing how social structures become individual consciousness across them, and grounding that reading in close attention to narrative form and translation. Such work would test the developmental arc that the existing criticism implies and would give firmer foundations to claims about the novels' continuing relevance to caste, democracy and ethics in contemporary India.

References

1. Ananthamurthy, U. R. (1976). *Samskara: A rite for a dead man* (A. K. Ramanujan, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1965)
2. Ananthamurthy, U. R. (1998). *Bhava* (J. Kroll, Trans., with the author). Penguin. (Original work published 1994)
3. Ananthamurthy, U. R. (2010). *Bharathipura* (S. Punitha, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1973)
4. Ananthamurthy, U. R. (2020). *Avasthe: A novel* (N. Hegde, Trans.). Harper Perennial. (Original work published 1978)
5. Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of caste* (S. Anand, Ed.). Navayana. (Original work published 1936)

6. Ananthamurthy, U. R. (1979). Search for identity: A viewpoint of a Kannada writer. In S. Kakar (Ed.), *Identity and adulthood* (pp. 105–117). Oxford University Press.
7. Baral, K. C., Rao, D. V., & Rath, S. P. (Eds.). (2005). *U. R. Anantha Murthy's Samskara: A critical reader*. Pencraft International.
8. Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
9. Dumont, L. (1980). *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications* (Complete rev. English ed.). University of Chicago Press.
10. Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon.
11. Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse: An essay in method* (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). Cornell University Press.
12. Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith, Eds. & Trans.). International Publishers.
13. Manavalli, K. (2001). *Caste, desire, and the representation of the gendered other in U. R. Ananthamurthy's "Samskara," "Ghatashraddha," and "Akkayya"* [Master's thesis, Old Dominion University]. ODU Digital Commons
14. Mukherjee, M. (1985). *Realism and reality: The novel and society in India*. Oxford University Press.
15. Nagaraj, D. R. (2010). *The flaming feet and other essays: The Dalit movement in India* (P. Chandra, Ed.). Permanent Black.
16. Nandy, A. (1983). *The intimate enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism*. Oxford University Press.
17. Parthasarathy, R. (1994). *Samskara: The passing of the Brahmin tradition*. In B. S. Miller (Ed.), *Masterworks of Asian literature in comparative perspective* (pp. 189–194). M. E. Sharpe.
18. Pillai, S. (2011). Gender representation in U. R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara*. *South Asia Research*, 31(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/026272801103100203>
19. Radhakrishnan, R. (2005). *Samskara: A reading*. In K. C. Baral, D. V. Rao, & S. P. Rath (Eds.), *U. R. Anantha Murthy's Samskara: A critical reader* (pp. 135–150). Pencraft International.
20. Ramanujan, A. K. (1976). Afterword. In U. R. Ananthamurthy, *Samskara: A rite for a dead man* (A. K. Ramanujan, Trans.). Oxford University Press.

21. Raval, S. (2005). Interpreting the cultural impasse in Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*. In K. C. Baral, D. V. Rao, & S. P. Rath (Eds.), *U. R. Anantha Murthy's Samskara: A critical reader*. Pencraft International.
22. Sartre, J.-P. (2007). *Existentialism is a humanism* (C. Macomber, Trans.). Yale University Press. (Original work published 1946)
23. Scroll.in. (2020, December 17). UR Ananthamurthy's seminal political novel *Avasthe* is out in English translation at the right time.
24. Singh, M. (2026). *Narrating Indian society and culture: A study of the novels of U. R. Ananthamurthy* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. M.J.P. Rohilkhand University.
25. Tirumalesh, K. V. (2005). The context of *Samskara*. In K. C. Baral, D. V. Rao, & S. P. Rath (Eds.), *U. R. Anantha Murthy's Samskara: A critical reader*. Pencraft International.