

Lived Structures: Caste, Reform and Political Agency as Individual Consciousness in U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*, *Bharathipura*, *Avasthe* and *Bhava*

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Abstract: Criticism on U. R. Ananthamurthy has shown that caste in *Samskara* and *Bharathipura* operates not only as an institution but as internalised consciousness. This paper argues that the same mechanism organises his fiction more broadly, and that it extends to religious authority, reformist modernity, party politics and the family. Through a comparative, interdisciplinary close reading of four novels in English translation, *Samskara* (1965), *Bharathipura* (1973), *Avasthe* (1978) and *Bhava* (1994), the study examines how social structures are lived as private experience by four protagonists: Praneshacharya, Jagannatha, Krishnappa Gowda and Vishwanath Shastri. The analysis combines sociological theories of caste and hegemony (Dumont, Ambedkar, Gramsci, Foucault) with existentialist ethics and narratology (Sartre, Genette). It finds that in each novel a public institution produces a private crisis: ritual paralysis becomes spiritual doubt, temple entry becomes the reformer's self-division, political compromise becomes bodily paralysis, and inherited notions of lineage become uncertainty about origins. It further finds that Ananthamurthy's narrative techniques, including free indirect narration, spatial symbolism, analepsis and open endings, are the means by which this internalisation is represented. Three hypotheses, concerning social critique, the tradition–modernity conflict, and literary technique, are tested and supported. The paper concludes that Ananthamurthy's central subject is the point at which structure becomes consciousness, and that social reform in his fiction fails or stalls wherever it changes institutions without changing that consciousness.

Keywords: U. R. Ananthamurthy; caste; internalisation; hegemony; existentialism; narratology; tradition and modernity; Kannada fiction in translation

1. INTRODUCTION

U. R. Ananthamurthy (1932–2014) wrote as an insider-critic of the South Indian Brahminical world. A leading voice of the Kannada Navya movement and a Jnanpith laureate, he used the novel to examine caste, religious orthodoxy, reform and democratic politics in post-independence India. His protagonists are rarely rebels or villains. They are educated, self-aware men who recognise injustice yet find themselves unable to act decisively against it.

Existing criticism has explained this pattern largely one novel at a time. Studies of *Samskara* focus on ritual and caste; studies of *Bharathipura* on temple entry and reform; the smaller literature on *Avasthe* on political allegory; and the sparse commentary on *Bhava* on existential themes. An important insight has emerged from the caste-centred criticism, namely that caste in these novels is lived as consciousness, shared by oppressor and oppressed, and not merely imposed from outside. But that insight has not been tested beyond the two caste novels.

This paper extends it. It argues that across all four novels Ananthamurthy represents the moment at which a social structure becomes an individual's inner experience, and that his narrative technique is designed to make that moment visible.

1.1 Research questions

1. How do the four novels represent caste, religion, political power and socio-economic change?
2. How do these structures become the psychological and ethical crises of individual protagonists?
3. Which narrative techniques does Ananthamurthy use to represent this process?

1.2 Hypotheses

- **H1.** The novels offer a sustained critique of the socio-cultural structures of Indian society.
- **H2.** The novels present the conflict between tradition and modernity as internal to individuals, not as a clash between separate groups.
- **H3.** Ananthamurthy uses distinctive literary techniques to express these social and cultural issues.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Framework

The study combines three bodies of theory, each answering one research question.

Structure. Dumont (1980) explains caste as a hierarchy ordered by purity and pollution, where ritual status can outweigh wealth or power. Ambedkar (1936/2014) reframes the same system

as graded inequality, sustained by religious sanction and resistant to piecemeal reform. Gramsci's concept of hegemony (1971) explains how such a system survives through consent rather than force, and Foucault's account of disciplinary power (1977) locates that consent in the regulation of bodies, spaces and conduct.

Consciousness. Sartre's existentialism (1946/2007) supplies the vocabulary of freedom, responsibility and bad faith: the refusal to own one's choices by attributing them to fixed roles or external necessity. This is used to read how protagonists experience, and sometimes evade, the structures that shape them.

Form. Genette's narratology (1980) provides the terms focalisation, analepsis (flashback) and duration, which are used to show how the narration itself enacts internalisation.

Together these frameworks yield a single analytical question for each novel: *through what institution, at what moment, and by what narrative means does a social structure become a private crisis?*

2.2 Method

The study is qualitative, descriptive and analytical. It uses comparative close reading of the standard English translations (Ramanujan, 1976; Punitha, 2010; Hegde, 2020; Kroll, 1998). Each novel is analysed in three steps: identify the governing institution; trace how it enters the protagonist's consciousness; and identify the narrative techniques that represent this. Findings are then compared across novels and tested against the three hypotheses. Because the study relies on translations, claims about diction are restricted to what is stable across translation, such as structure, symbolism and point of view.

3. SAMSKARA: RITUAL AUTHORITY BECOMES SPIRITUAL DOUBT

Institution. The governing structure of *Samskara* is ritual purity. When Naranappa dies, the agrahara cannot decide whether a man who ate forbidden food, lived with the low-caste Chandri and threw the sacred saligrama stone into the river is still a Brahmin entitled to Brahmin rites. Until the question is settled no one may eat. The dispute is Dumontian in the strict sense: what is at stake is not Naranappa's property or power but the community's ritual status, and the fear that handling the body wrongly will pollute everyone.

The novel is equally clear that this hierarchy survives by consent. The Brahmins' relatives covet Naranappa's gold even as they debate his purity, and it is Chandri, excluded from the rules, who offers her ornaments to pay for his rites and who finally arranges the cremation. The structure's authority thus rests on shared belief rather than coercion, which is Gramsci's point about hegemony.

Internalisation. The crisis passes from the community to Praneshacharya because the community delegates its judgment to him. His identity is built on scriptural mastery and ascetic discipline, including years of caring for his invalid wife. When the texts yield no answer and the god he petitions gives no sign, the failure of an institution becomes the failure of a self. His night with Chandri in the forest completes the transfer: he has now broken the very code he was asked to adjudicate, and his wanderings through the second half of the novel, including the temple fair where he eats unrecognised among strangers, are an attempt to discover whether any identity remains once ritual identity has gone. In Sartrean terms, the novel refuses him the bad faith of hiding behind his role.

Technique. Ananthamurthy represents this passage chiefly through free indirect narration focalised through Praneshacharya, so that the reader follows ritual categories dissolving from within. The rotting corpse and the rats and vultures that multiply around the agrahara make pollution literal and communal, while the Acharya's crisis remains private. The open ending, in which Praneshacharya returns to face the Brahmins without having decided what to tell them, withholds resolution because the novel's subject is the unresolved condition itself.

4. BHARATHIPURA: REFORM BECOMES SELF-DIVISION

Institution. In *Bharathipura* the structure is spatial as well as ritual. The town's economy and identity are organised around the Manjunatha temple, and the Holeyas' exclusion from it is enforced by where they may walk, whom they may approach and what they may touch. This is Foucault's disciplinary power in a caste idiom: the hierarchy lives in regulated bodies and places more than in written rules. The temple is therefore not only a sacred site but the centre of social legitimacy, so that entry would redistribute symbolic authority.

Internalisation. Jagannatha, a Brahmin landlord returned from England, treats caste as a false belief that a single dramatic act can dispel. The novel's key scenes show why this fails. When he presses the Holeyas to touch the sacred saligrama from his household shrine, their terror

reveals that exclusion has become part of their own sense of what is possible and safe. As Ambedkar argued, graded inequality recruits every rung into its maintenance. Jagannatha's response to their fear, which moves between compassion and anger, reveals the second internalisation: the reformer's own privilege. He needs the Holeyas to enact his liberation for his own sake, and he is himself shaken by the sacrilege he stages.

His position is hybrid in Bhabha's sense. His English education supplies a language of equality that no one in the town shares, while his landlord status supplies the power to act on it. The novel does not allow him to resolve this doubleness. The temple-entry campaign produces fear, hesitation and backlash rather than the liberating moment he imagined, and the most durable change it brings is in Jagannatha's knowledge of his own complicity.

Technique. Ananthamurthy uses spatial symbolism, especially the temple threshold, to externalise the boundary that the characters carry within. Extended passages of self-scrutiny focalised through Jagannatha expose the gap between his reformist rhetoric and his motives, and the refusal to stage a triumphant entry denies the reader the comfort of symbolic reform.

5. *AVASTHE*: POLITICAL COMPROMISE BECOMES BODILY PARALYSIS

Institution. *Avasthe* moves the analysis from caste and temple to party and state. Its protagonist, Krishnappa Gowda, rose from rural poverty to lead a peasant movement and enter parliamentary socialist politics. As he lies paralysed and, though not yet fifty, close to death, a national leader is moving toward authoritarian rule and party colleagues are manoeuvring to use his name. The novel stages competing idioms of change, Gandhian, socialist, radical-left and electoral, without endorsing any of them.

Internalisation. Here the structure enters consciousness through memory. Confined to his bed, Krishnappa revisits his past: a defiant, quick-tempered boyhood, the friendships and mentors who shaped him, and the long sequence of alliances and silences by which the movement became a career. The novel's insight is that political corruption is not a single betrayal but an accumulation of small, reasonable compromises, each justified by necessity. This is precisely what Sartre calls bad faith: the claim that circumstances rather than choices made one what one is. Krishnappa's reckoning refuses that excuse, and it is conducted while hangers-on continue to flatter him as the leader he no longer believes himself to be.

Caste does not disappear in this political novel. Krishnappa's origins in a cultivating community and the pride with which he confronted social superiors as a youth frame his politics as, in part, a response to caste humiliation, so that the novel links the structures of *Samskara* and *Bharathipura* to the structures of democratic power.

Technique. The paralysed body is the governing symbol. Foucault's insight that power works on bodies is here turned inward: the body that once marched and swam now registers, in its immobility, the exhaustion of the ideals that animated it. Narratively, the novel is built from analepsis. Genette's distinction between the time of the story and the time of its telling becomes thematic, since the present of illness is almost static while the remembered past is crowded with action, and the gap between them is the measure of Krishnappa's self-judgment.

6. BHAVA: LINEAGE BECOMES UNCERTAINTY ABOUT ORIGINS

Institution. *Bhava* seems at first to leave social structure behind for metaphysics, but its plot is driven by an institution as powerful as caste: patrilineal descent, with its rules of legitimacy, female chastity and ritual inheritance. Vishwanath Shastri, a celebrated Harikatha performer, recognises on a train a Sri Chakra amulet worn by Dinakar, a television actor on an Ayyappa pilgrimage. It resembles one that belonged to Saroja, the wife Shastri believed he had killed decades earlier, suspecting her of carrying another man's child. The same pattern repeats a generation later, when Dinakar learns that Prasad, a boy marked for spiritual attainment, may be his son or his friend Narayan Tantri's.

Internalisation. In this novel the structure produces violence first and doubt afterwards. Shastri's act was made possible by a code that treats a wife's suspected infidelity as a threat to lineage and honour; the novel then shows him carrying that act as lifelong guilt, performed away in his devotional recitals but never resolved. Dinakar, conversely, experiences the same code as absence: a man in search of a mother and a name. Each asks the questions the novel poses and cannot answer: whose son am I, and whose father? The patriarchal insistence on knowable origins is thus converted into the characters' inner uncertainty.

The title's double sense, *bhava* as both being and becoming, reframes that uncertainty. Against the fixed identities that lineage demands, the novel sets a view of the self as process. Sitamma, Narayan's mother, who attends to the living without anxiety about their parentage, embodies a peace that the male characters seek through ritual and renunciation without finding.

Existentialism and the Indian concept of *samsara* meet here: freedom lies not in discovering one's origin but in ceasing to be governed by the question.

Technique. *Bhava* uses a mystery structure that it deliberately refuses to solve. Shifting focalisation among three generations produces parallel stories that mirror one another, so that repetition replaces resolution. Symbolic objects, above all the amulet, carry the burden of the past between characters who cannot speak of it directly.

7. DISCUSSION: COMPARATIVE FINDINGS

The four analyses reveal one recurring mechanism: a public institution, confronted by an event it cannot absorb, transfers its crisis into the consciousness of one individual. Table 1 sets out the pattern.

Table 1. Structure, internalisation and technique across the four novels

Novel	Governing institution	Precipitating event	Protagonist	Internalised crisis	Principal techniques
<i>Samskara</i> (1965)	Ritual purity and Brahmin authority	Death of a heterodox Brahmin	Praneshacharya	Collapse of an identity built on scripture	Free indirect narration; decaying body as symbol; open ending
<i>Bharathipura</i> (1973)	Caste organised through sacred space	Temple-entry campaign	Jagannatha	Reformer's complicity and self-division	Spatial symbolism (threshold); self-scrutinising focalisation
<i>Avasthe</i> (1978)	Party politics and the state	Paralysis amid a slide toward authoritarianism	Krishnappa Gowda	Recognition of accumulated compromise	Analepsis; the paralysed body as allegory
<i>Bhava</i> (1994)	Patrilineal descent and chastity codes	Recognition of an amulet	Vishwanath Shastri; Dinakar	Guilt and uncertainty about origins	Unsolved mystery structure; mirrored generations;

Novel	Governing institution	Precipitating event	Protagonist	Internalised crisis	Principal techniques
					symbolic object

7.1 Testing the hypotheses

H1 (social critique) is supported. Each novel targets a different structure, from ritual hierarchy to party politics to patriarchal lineage, and in each the structure is shown to depend on consent and participation. Ananthamurthy's critique is therefore broader than caste alone, although caste recurs in every novel as a background condition.

H2 (tradition and modernity as internal conflict) is supported, with a refinement. The conflict is never staged as tradition versus modernity between opposed groups. It is located inside individuals who hold both. Moreover, modernity is itself shown to generate new structures, such as the party machine in *Avasthe* and the reformer's liberal self-image in *Bharathipura*, which are internalised just as tradition is.

H3 (distinctive technique) is supported. The techniques vary by novel but share a function: each renders visible the moment of internalisation. Focalisation carries the crisis inward; symbols (a corpse, a threshold, a paralysed body, an amulet) give the structure a physical form; and open or unresolved endings refuse the reader a closure the characters cannot reach.

7.2 Reform and consciousness

The comparison also clarifies why reform stalls in Ananthamurthy's fiction. In each novel, change at the level of institutions, a funeral finally performed, a temple entered, a party in power, leaves the internalised structure intact. What changes, where anything does, is the protagonist's self-knowledge. This is not political quietism. It is a claim that structural reform requires a parallel transformation of consciousness, a claim close to Ambedkar's insistence that caste is a state of mind that must be destroyed, not merely a set of rules to be amended.

The novels also suggest a career-long movement from collective to individual settings. *Samskara* and *Bharathipura* place the crisis within communities; *Avasthe* within the nation; *Bhava* within the family and the self. Yet the mechanism is constant, which suggests that

Ananthamurthy's later inwardness is not a retreat from social criticism but its continuation by other means.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the defining subject of U. R. Ananthamurthy's fiction is the point at which social structure becomes individual consciousness. Criticism had already shown this for caste in *Samskara* and *Bharathipura*; the comparative reading here shows the same mechanism governing religious authority, reformist modernity, democratic politics and patriarchal lineage across four novels written over three decades. In each case an institution meets an event it cannot absorb, and its crisis is lived as the private crisis of one self-aware protagonist. Ananthamurthy's narrative techniques are the instruments that make this passage visible.

The findings have two implications. For criticism, they suggest that *Bhava* and *Avasthe* should be read as continuations of Ananthamurthy's social project rather than departures from it. For teaching, they offer a single, transferable question, where does the structure enter the self, that students can bring to other fiction concerned with caste, reform and power.

Limitations and further research

The study is limited to four novels and to English translations, so claims about language and style are necessarily cautious. It is interpretive rather than empirical. Future work could test the argument against Ananthamurthy's short fiction and essays, compare the translations with the Kannada originals, develop a sustained feminist reading of the women characters across all four novels, and use reader-response or classroom studies to examine how contemporary readers respond to these narratives of complicity and change.

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