CHAPTER II

TRAVAILS OF THE SOCIALLY DEPRESSED

We preach neither social equality nor inequality,
but that every being has the same right.
- Swami Vivekananda

The origin of the word *society* comes from the Latin *societas*, a "friendly association with others." The meaning of society is closely related to what is social. Its members share some mutual concern or interest with a common objective. Society was born when people started ‘living together’, sharing certain common works and modes of behaviour. In a society it became compulsory for groups of people to indulge in some particular work, and those who undertook one particular occupation came to be viewed as belonging to one particular class.

The nomadic tribes of ancient India did not have a fixed caste system, as it is today. They initially assigned roles based on an individual’s aptitude, ability and qualities, and thus came into existence the Varna system which included the four class systems of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. The term ‘varna’ means ‘colour’ as well as ‘veil’. In the context of colour, people have confused it to mean race, but it actually represents the distinct qualities [gunas] that the four functional classes possess in their hearts and minds.

The person who possessed the qualities of purity, love, faith and development, and sought true knowledge with a spiritual temperament was represented by the colour ‘white’. Those who had this colour belonged to the Brahmin class. If a person possessed the qualities of action, will, aggression, and sought honour, power and status with a martial and political temperament, he would be represented by the colour
‘red’. Those who had this colour belonged to the Kshatriya class. If a person tried to seek communication, interchange, trade and possessed a commercial temperament, he was represented by the colour ‘yellow’. Such people made up the Vaishya class. Those individuals who showed ignorance, inertia and dullness were represented by the colour ‘black’. Those who had this colour were dependent on the rest of the world for motivation and sought nothing as they existed in servile position. They made up the Sudra class.

There is also another story regarding the birth of the four classes of society. According to Hindu mythology, four different forms of energy for the human race were formed out of Brahma’s body. Brahmins were created at dawn, Kshatriyas at noon, Vaishyas at dusk and Sudras at night. It is to be noted that these were the Varnas [colours] and not ‘caste’ as now thought of today. Usually, it is told, that Brahmins were born from Brahma’s head, ending with Sudras from the feet. In the Rig Veda the varnas were not rigid and were related to one’s actions.

The Rig Veda contains another Hindu story to explain the origins of the four classes of Hinduism. It is said that the universe began with the great sacrifice of the cosmic being Purusha. From its head [mouth] came the Brahmin class, and from its arms came the Kshatriya [warrior/ruling] class. Other classes came from its legs Vaishyas and feet Sudras.

The Hindu religion, in the course of its historical transition created the concept of *Varnashra Dharma*, which divides human race into four main classes: the priests, the warriors, the traders and the menial workers. Originally this concept was flexible and its principle represented human occupations in accordance with human dispositions. But later on it became rigid, and quite unfortunately the external form of the concept became more important than the inner spirit, and the four-fold classification became a
water-tight division. This type of Varnashra Dharma was conceived as a kind of strategy to facilitate the performance of work. Instead of being a constructive source, thus, it became a hindrance to human progress.

In ancient India there was mobility between Varnas, as people learned new skills and changed their actions and occupations. Thus, the class system was in accordance with the individual’s occupation. The warriors and the kshatryas protected the Hindu society, the vaishyas pursued trade and the sudras performed menial chores of farming, labour, artisans and all the jobs required of a society.

As years went on, Brahmins and Kshatriyas who ensured spiritual salvation and protected the society, respectively, became stronger members than the other classes and began to take prominent roles in society. Both Brahmins and Kshatriyas were allowed to study the Vedas. Kshatriyas studied the martial arts too. The Brahmins and Kshatriyas, and later Vaishyas, had to perform communion ceremony called ‘Upanayanam’ (thread ceremony), while the Sudras who laboured in the farms and other fields came to be considered inferior to the other three classes. This led the society to form a more rigid social system, where one’s position was determined by birth rather than merit. The word caste derives from the Portuguese casta, meaning breed, race, or kind. Among the Indian terms it is translated as ‘varna’ or ‘jati’.

Thereafter, those in the more powerful classes enforced this caste system to remain in power. Castes today are associated with an occupation, such as Brahmins, farmers, artisans like potters and carpenters and untouchable leather workers, butchers, launderers and latrine cleaners. Since 1935 untouchables have been known as Scheduled Castes. They are also called Harijans [Children of God], as Gandhi liked to call them. In the 1990s they prefer to be called themselves as ‘Dalits’, a Hindi word meaning ‘oppressed’ or ‘downtrodden’. Although the class system was fluid in early
India, and an individual rose or fell on his own merit, historians generally agree that caste system became hereditary around the time of Buddhism and Jainism based on archeological and other evidences of the communities that existed in India. During the Epic Age, people began to question these social institutions and such struggle goes on even in the present day.

In the course of the historical transition in Hindu religion, a way of regarding ritualism as a genuine expression of religion came into vogue. The original root of Hindu religion is viewed as an expression of spiritualism. Spiritualism and ritualism came to be regarded as complementary to each other. When religion was projected more and more as a manifestation of ritualism, the growth of the doctrine of human purity as the only avenue to gain entry into the Kingdom of God became unavoidable. Those who performed religious rituals were regarded as superior to other people. This gave way to distinctions among human beings. A large group of people, plunged in to poverty and ignorance, were placed in a lower state. Those people were treated by the religious people as low and sub-human. They became the target of insult and attack, as they had unclean habits and ate all kinds of animal flesh. They were kept away from the premises of the temples. Even their shadow should not fall upon the high born people. Their sight and touch were regarded as desecration and they were kept away from the socially higher groups. A dark gloom developed their life, as the peculiar nature of their profession did not impart dignity to their life. This is how Hinduism, which was essentially spiritual in its original form and ideal, became ritualistic in its middle phase, and as a result, stratum-consciousness had become an integral part of the Hindu society.

Though untouchability is prevalent in some places in India, it is generally perceived that there are only socially depressed; economically exploited and
religiously deceived people, who suffer in the hands of the so-called socially,
economically and religiously superior people.

Mulk Raj Anand and Imayam, in spite of their regional and linguistic differences,
come together in the treatment of the predicament of the socially depressed people.
They portray how such unfortunate people are treated with disrespect, and sometimes
with hatred, and exploited by high-born people for their own personal benefits.

The conviction of Anand is based on a critical examination of the ancient Indian
heritage and Anand boldly puts the blame on the religion of Hinduism for the practice
of man’s inhumanity to man. That is why, in his book Apology for Heroism, he shows
that he is a firm and uncompromising denouncer of the Hindu religion. “It is not very
well known that Hinduism has tended for a long time to be more and more the social
organism of caste and less and less unified religion”(1).

Anand’s handling of the problem of the socially depressed was motivated by his
association with Mahatma Gandhi and his stay at Sabarmathi Ashram. Saros
Cowasjee reminds how Gandhi’s ‘Young India’ served as a background for Anand’s
Untouchable. “In 1932, while perusing the pages of Gandhiji’s magazine Young
India, he was impressed by Gandhi’s narrative about a sweeper called Uka, and
decided to meet the Mahatma and to read him his novel” (94).

Projection of the travails of the socially depressed people who work for the
socially better off and higher-born in society, and who depend for their livelihood on
those more fortunate people is the main focus of this chapter. Since harijans, as
Gandhi would like to call the untouchables, come under the broader class of the
socially depressed, their predicament is also delineated in this chapter. In fact, Mulk
Raj Anand, who has been mentally obsessed with the predicament of the
untouchables, has devoted a whole novel, Untouchable to make their problems known
to other people in society. He even makes use of the term ‘untouchable’ quite often to bring home his strong plea for the betterment of such people.

Anand, in his Untouchable, narrates a series of pathetic incidents that occurred in a day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy of eighteen and the lowest among the social strata.

Where there are no drains, no light, no water; of the marshland where people live among the latrines of the townsmen, and in the sink of their own dung scattered about here, there and everywhere; of the world where the day is dark as the night and the night Pitch-dark. (Untouchable 18)

Right from dawn Bakha comes across many unpleasant incidents which are inseparably mingled with the downtrodden people. The abusive voice of his father Lakha awakens him and a sepoy’s shout pulls him up from his bed to attend to his routine duty of cleaning the stinking latrines, in which he is an expert. He works earnestly and quickly.

Each muscle of his body, hard as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass. He must have had immense pent-up resources lying deep in his body, for he rushed along with considerable skill and alacrity from one doorless latrine to another, cleaning, brushing, pouring phenoil.

(18)

He works “with a sort of dignity which does not usually belong to the ordinary scavenger, who is as a rule uncouth and unclean” (19). After cleaning the latrines, Bakha, would burn the refuse in the chimney meant for it and he derives a kind of delight in doing the job. He is purifying the whole locality and thus doing a great service to humanity, which the caste Hindus, who claim to have two thousand years of racial and social superiority, do not approve of.
Anand portrays the uncongenial atmosphere at the home of the socially depressed, where there is no ventilation to allow the smoke from the oven to pass out. It is highly inhuman that they are prohibited to go near the village well because the Hindus of the upper castes would consider it polluted. The untouchables are not allowed access to the nearby brook, as their use of it would contaminate the stream. They have no well of their own because it would cost a lot of money to dig a well in such a hilly town Bhlandshahr. They have to wait near the caste Hindus’ well and depend on the bounty of some of their superiors to pour water into their pitchers. Quite often there would be no caste Hindu present. Most of them are rich enough to pay for water carriers. So the outcastes have to wait for chance or luck to bring some caste Hindus to the well crowding round it, joining their hands in servile humility to every passer-by, cursing their fate and bemoaning their lot if they were denied the help they wanted.

Once Lakha asks Bakha to go and sweep the roads in the town and the temple courtyard in his stead. Bakha willingly accepts to undertake his father’s instruction, as sweeping the roads is somewhat more gentlemanly than doing dirty work in the latrine. Bakha turns to his brother Rakha and instructs him to do the work at the latrines in his absence. Chota and Ram Charan, two of their friends, try to dissuade Bakha and Rakha from going for work. They are interested in witnessing the hockey match to be played in the evening of the day. Chota and Ram Charan are truants, however rebuked at home, or even beaten. But Bakha has principles. With him duty is first, although he is a champion of all kinds of games. He seems intent on his work and is about to move on, when two white-clad, delicate young boys greet him. The elder of the two, a boy of ten, urges his younger brother of eight to go to school without being late. Noticing the ardent, enthusiastic look that brightens the little boy’s face, Bakha thinks of the prospects of going to school to learn how to read and write.
“The anxiety of going to school! How beautiful it felt! How nice it must be to be able to read and write!” (19).

When Bakha first expressed his wish to be a Sahib, his uncle at the British barracks told him that he should have to go to school if he wanted to be a Sahib. Bakha wept and cried to be allowed to go to school, but his father told him that schools were meant for the haves, not for the ‘bhangis’. Only later Bakha realised why his father had not sent him to school. He was a sweeper’s son and could never be a babu and there was no school which admits him because the parents of other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of a sweeper’s son. Even the teachers, doing noble profession, would not teach the outcastes “lest their fingers which guided the students across the text should touch the leaves of the outcast’s book and they polluted” (44).

Though he is a sweeper, he could not consciously accept that fact. Since there was no other way, he had begun to work at the latrines at the age of six and resigned himself to the hereditary life of the craft, though he dreamt of becoming a Sahib by self-education, which had not proceeded beyond the alphabet. A bitter lesson comes to him that people like him have no place at all in the scheme of social life.

Bakha passes through all possible types of frustration and despair. There are at least four major incidents in which he is put to shame. Bakha wants to purchase a packet of ‘Red Lamp’ cigarettes on his way towards the town to carry out his job of sweeping. He stops at the shop selling betal leaves and puts an anna, [formerly a coin of unit of money which was one sixteenth of a rupee] on the board. The shop-keeper sprinkles water on the coin and throws it into the counter. Then he throws the packet of cigarettes at Bakha as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffig round the corner of his shop.
The imagery employed by Anand shows the cruelty, contempt and callousness of the caste Hindus, like the shop-keeper, to the people like Bakha. Bakha feels much humiliated and realises his position in society. The high caste society seems to cherish the belief that the coin of a low-born can carry the seed of cancer disease.

The same humiliating experience is repeated at the confectioner’s shop, where Bakha goes to buy some sweets, which the confectioner wrapped in a paper and throws at him like a cricket ball. The coins given by Bakha for the sweet are taken by the confectioner’s assistant after splashing some water on them.

The untouchables should not come into physical contact with the caste Hindus lest the latter should be polluted. When they move on the road, it is obligatory on their part to announce their approach so that the caste Hindus can keep away from their touch. But Bakha’s over enthusiasm in eating the jilebis [sweet meat made by frying maize flour paste in oil and dropping in sugar treacle] makes him forget himself, and in an unguarded moment, hits against Lallaji inadvertently. “Why don’t you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me cock-eyed son of low-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take bath to purify myself” 53).

A group of caste Hindus who gather there shower the most abusive epithets on him, calling him a dirty dog, son of a bitch and offspring of a pig. Bakha feels for his unintentional mistake and begs pardon for Lallaji, who gives a slap on his cheek and disappears in the crowd. Bakha has dual instincts to show in this incident. Had he wanted, he could have easily thrashed Lallaji or anyone in the crowd. But centuries of submission to the caste Hindus parlaylses his instincts. What is more pathetic is that the crowds press him round without even a morsel of pity for his remorse. They keep standing unmoved without heeding to his apologies, and taking a sort of sadistic
delight in watching him cower under the abuses and curses. Every second seems to Bakha an endless age of woe and suffering.

Taking into consideration the magnitude of untouchability, the punishment Bakha receives is very light for violating the accepted age-old code of conduct. According to Prof. Cowasjee,

.... the most violent incident in the novel is only a slap that Bakha receives from a passer by. I have said only for not too long ago three untouchables in village in Madhya Pradesh were shot by caste Hindus for daring to grow their moustaches upwards, when local custom decrees that persons of low caste grow them downwards. And a young boy in Andhra Pradesh was tied to a pole and burnt alive before a huge crowd the incident making repeated headlines in the press. Anand could have inflicted any torture he wished to on his hero and remained fully within the bounds of credibility. (47)

Bakha learns to accept his fate and has no conscious protest against the reprimand and punishment received, since he has given up all hopes of becoming a gentleman. When a shopkeeper in the crowd calls him “rape-sister” and asks him to be sure to shout for others to feel his presence, Bakha bears the abuse silently, and leaves the place, shouting “Posh, posh, sweeper coming” to avoid any further insult or humiliation or punishment. He is now sure that “For them I am a sweeper, sweeper, sweeper – untouchable! untouchable! untouchable! That’s the word! untouchable! I am an untouchable!” (Untouchable 59).

Another incident which greatly upsets and demoralizes Bakha occurs in the temple where Pandit Kalinath tries to seduce his sister Sohini. When Sohini is waiting at the well for someone to offer her some water, the Pandit sees her sitting patiently away from the throng. He has seen her before and recognizes her as the sweeper’s daughter.
He has noticed her as she went to clean the latrines in the town and been impressed by her fresh, young form and her alluring physical appearance. Pretending to be considerate to her, he offers her water, and asks her to clean the courtyard of his house at the temple.

The low caste people are not permitted to go near the temple. It is believed that going near the temple, within sixty-nine yards, according to the Holy Books, will pollute the temple for which sacrificial fire is to be arranged in order to purify themselves and the temple. Whenever Bakha sees devotees going into the temple murmuring names of God, his impulse to go near and look at the temple grows more and more intensely. At last, he goes slowly near the temple with a strong will and determination to see what is going on inside. At that time he hears a startling cry of the priest, sounding “polluted”. Bakha gets frightened and feels as if dead for a while because he thinks the priest has cried “polluted’ only on seeing Bakha going near the temple. As he looks around the place, he finds his sister Sohini weeping. He understands from his sister that the priest has cunningly averted the crisis by throwing the blame on her. Bakha wants to kill the priest when he learns the real story. But Lakha appeases his anger. “No, no, my son… we can’t do that. They are our superiors. The word of theirs is sufficient against all that we might say before the police. They are the masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us” (90).

Anand, thus, shows the spiritual degeneration and hypocrisy of the temple priests in general. The irony of the situation is that the priest begins to shout ‘polluted’, when Sohini, alarmed by the advances of the priest, starts screaming for help and protection. If the priest had been allowed to do as he pleased, the situation would have been different and there would have been no pollution at all. It is just similar to that of being polluted since slapping involves touching.
Anand shows the evils of a decadent and perverted Hindu orthodox society, which is concerned more with hollow religious sentiments than their real sanctity. As Prof. Williams puts it:

Anand wants to expose the vicious injustice inflicted by privileged members of Indian society on the poor, the dehumanizing of a whole class of workers. Brahminical religion comes in for considerable satire. Anand shows that religious sanctions have been given to social inequality. Priests and Sadhus are exposed as hypocrites and purity is honoured only ritualistically! (32-33)

One more incident that makes Bakha indignant with the lot of the untouchables occurs when he goes to the town to collect food. The untouchables get their food, thanks to the mercy of the caste Hindus, who usually give them the left-over food, that too with contempt. When Bakha proceeds to the Silver Smith’s lane, he is abused by a woman who accuses him of having defiled her house by his contact for which holy water is to be sprinkled. The irony is that some chapattis [small flat thin unleavened roasted bread] are hurled down. They fall on the place where the woman’s son was relieving himself. Actually the place is defiled by her son relieving himself there, and not by Bakha. When a small boy gets injured in the hockey match and Bakha, out of compassion, carries him to his house. This action of Bakha does not elicit any appreciation from Babu’s wife, instead she scolds him for having touched and polluted her son. Bakha is much worried for the inhuman treatment of the thankless society, and says in utter grief, “I only get abuse and derision wherever I go Pollution, Pollution; I do nothing else but pollute people” (Untouchable 59).

Doctors, according to their professional dharma, should concern themselves with diseases, and not the patient’s caste or class. But in the early days when orthodox
religious creeds were strong, the doctors did not give treatment to the outcastes because the high caste people would not come to them for treatment. When Bakha was once ill, Lakha went to Dr. Hakim to get some medicine for his son. He could not at first even see the doctor, and he was pleading with any Babu whom he met to make his message reach the ears of Dr. Hakim that his son was suffering from fever and had been unconscious from the previous night. At last, he dared to enter the house and pleaded with the doctor by holding both his hands; but Dr. Hakim was red and pale with anger, and shouted at the top of his voice: “Chander! by whose orders have you come here? And then you join hands and hold my feet and say you will become my slave for ever. You have polluted hundreds of rupees worth of medicine. Will you pay for it” (92)?

Lakha’s persistent pleadings melted Hakim’s heart and went to Lakha’s house and saved Bakha’s life. Bakha, who could not adjust himself with the prevailing conditions, unlike his father Lakha, and tolerate the humiliation and atrocities meted out to the outcastes, told his father that the doctor, instead of saving him, might have better killed him. Lakha, who had never in his life renounced his deep-rooted sense of inferiority and the docile acceptance of the laws of fate said, “they are really kind. We must realize that it is religion which prevents them from touching us” (93).

In Lakha we find a traditional sweeper who accepts all humiliations as predestined to his lot. He believes that the low-born are an inseparable part of the Hindu society, and they have to tolerate all insults and atrocities. He pacifies his agitated son by saying that their words against the cast Hindus would fetch nothing. They must respect them because they are their masters.

But Bakha is a rebel, who desires to break the tradition, and thus he is a symbol of modernity. When his sister Sohini is attempted to be molested, Bakha tells his father,
“I could have given them a bit of my mind” (90) Bakha is a humanitarian, sensitive to the sufferings of others. It is this in Bakha which puts him in trouble when he rescues the Babu’s little son who gets hurt in the hockey match. Without knowing that it was not Bakha but the washerman’s son, Ram Charan, who hit the child, the mother of the injured boy curses Bakha. Saying “Vay, eater of your masters! What have you done? You have killed my son, “and then “You have defiled my house, besides wounding my son!” (Untouchable, 129). Bakha’s soliloquy throws light on his humanitarian consideration: “Of course I polluted the child. I couldn’t help doing so. I knew my touch would pollute. But it was impossible not to pick him up. He was dazed, the poor little thing. And she abused me” (130).

Bakha’s hope for a solution brings him face to face with three possibilities: religious conversion, Gandhism and modernization. Colonel Hutchinson tries to convert Bakha into Christianity by reciting the Biblical songs and the preachings of Christ, which only baffles Bakha who does not understand the meaning of the high language. Bakha comes to know only one thing, that is, all are equal before Jesus. In reality, Bakha is following the Colonel for getting trousers, which has been a dream in his life. But the Colonel thinks that Bakha follows him because he is interested in conversion. When Bakha wants to know the merit of Christ, Hutchinson is not able to offer an existentially satisfying explanation. His answer that Christ sacrificed his life and died for both the rich and the poor does not carry any weight. Hutchinson’s proselytizing zeal does not go to the core of Bakha’s grief. As M.K. Naik says, “the colonel’s proselytizing zeal and blundering humanitarianism only confuse and repeal Bakha, who runs away from him”( 34). Further, Bakha is afraid of the idea of conversion, because he cannot so easily come out of the religion followed by his parents and forefathers. Bakha’s failure to understand the Holy Trinity and the
concept of the Original Sin explains his rejection of Christianity as a solution for the removal of untouchability. “The whole basis of western culture is wholly rejected in Bakha’s comic encounter with the Christian missionary, Mr. Hutchinson” (Robertson 13).

The second possible solution to remove untouchability is Gandhiji’s method. Bakha’s good fortune makes him listen to the speech of Gandhiji, who calls the untouchables ‘the children of God’. It is a great relief to Bakha to know that even he, who is an untouchable, is a Harijan, a child of God. Gandhiji regards untouchability as the greatest disgrace to Hinduism. Gandhi himself undertakes the work of sewage disposal. Gandhi tells them that when he was twelve, a scavenger named Uka, an untouchable, used to attend their house for cleaning the latrines. Gandhi was forbidden to touch Uka. If accidentally he touched Uka, he was asked to perform ablutions. Though he obeyed, he used to tell his mother that untouchability was not sanctioned by religion, and it was wrong to consider physical contact with Uka sinful. The notion that no one is superior or inferior by the nature of his work impresses not only Bakha but all the people who listen to the speech of Gandhi. Bakha actually gets thrilled when Gandhi remarks: “But if I have to be reborn. I should wish to be reborn as an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from their miserable condition” (Untouchable 164).

The second suggestion is more meaningful than the first one. “In order to emancipate themselves they should purify themselves. They have to rid themselves of evil habits like drinking liquor and eating carrion” (165).

They should cease to accept the leavings from the plates of high caste Hindus. Instead, they should accept only grains and that too, only if it is courteously offered. If
they are able to do all these, Gandhi is sure that they will secure their emancipation. Gandhiji wants to pass the message to society that God is “the purifier of the polluted souls” and makes it a sin to regard anyone born in Hinduism as polluted. He wants to mend the attitude of the caste Hindus towards the untouchables from heinousness to kindness.

The third means of salvation for the untouchables is what Anand himself favours. That is, poet Iqbal Singh Sarashar’s idea of introducing machines, the flush system, to clear the dung instead of using the untouchables. If flush system is introduced to clean the latrines without any human being to handle it manually, the sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society. (173)

The poet also advocates the installation of modern sanitary systems as a means of removing untouchability. It is like returning to “the modified culture in which one is born – a purified Hinduism which can incorporate aspects of Western culture, such as the flush system” (Robertson 13).

Bakha feels that the poet is closer to the heart of the problem of untouchability because dung cleaning which brings indignity to the man who does it is performed by a machine. Gandhiji has given a new psychological and spiritual status to the untouchables by glorifying them as harijans. The poet’s plea for modernization based on the flush system does not keep out the Gandhian remedy. P.K. Rajan rightly says, “What the poet envisages is modernization through industrialization within the framework of Gandhism” (21).

The travails of the underprivileged are shown by Mulk Raj Anand in The Road also. Untouchable portrays the sufferings of a low caste person who is put to shame
and humiliation on the ground of his low birth. In *The Road*, Anand’s main mission as a social reformer is to lay emphasis on mass action and collective transformation. In *Untouchable* Anand suggests three possible remedies to do away with the problem of low-born: conversion into Christianity, Gandhian way and modernization. In *The Road* he suggests a fourth remedy for eradicating their problem. Anand feels that the depressed people remain scattered and they must organize themselves into a powerful group, working towards a common programme of social action. A co-ordinated social programme involving work and activity is suggested as a means of emancipation. Anand feels that the gospel of work is a major source for liberating the suppressed class from indignity and wretchedness.

Anand’s return to the theme twenty-five years later in *The Road* shows his emotional involvement with the problem. Anand explains:

Well, it was a kind of shock to me when I went to live in Haryana, twenty miles from Delhi, in the human empire of Jawaharlal Nehru, to find that the outcastes not only in South India, but in the mixed north were still consigned to the limbo of oblivion. There was something tragicomic to me in the fact that the caste Hindus would not touch the stones quarried by the untouchables to make the road, because the stones have been touched by the untouchables. *(Author to Critic: The Letters of Mulk Raj Anand to Saros Cowasjee 124)*

Bhikhu, the protagonist of *The Road* is a road worker and not a sweeper like Bakha, but his condition is not much different from Bakha’s. “Indeed what is significant in the novel is that it views Bhikhu’s situation as expressive of the chronic malaise with which Indian society is stricken, a malaise which makes it difficult for him to survive with dignity and with unimpaired self-esteem” *(Paul 21).*
Bhikhu believes that work is a means of deliverance and co-operative enterprise that provides a new dimension to an old problem. He possesses a formidable forward-looking disposition. He tries to gather his people with an aim to put them on a new path. His plan is to build an approach road which will link the village with the town.

When Bhikhu is working on the project of constructing the road, a powerful objection is made by the people of higher castes. Actually they have no objection to the laying of the road as such, but their objection is that such a road should not be constructed by low-born people, though they know that it will be equally useful to them. The high caste Hindus think that the construction of the road confers economic freedom on the depressed classes by bringing them better wages and substantial job opportunities.

Not all caste Hindus are bad, according to Anand. Bhikhu’s mother tells her son, “Look how Lambardar Dhoali Singh favours you! And he is of the same caste as the landlord” (The Road 2) And Havildar Charat Singh observes: They have, however, a powerful ally in Dhooli Singh who helps them continually at the cost of alienation from his caste and even from his family (74).

Dhooli Singh is projected as a great crusader for the cause of the depressed classes. According to Anand, both Bhikhu and Dhooli Singh are important and indispensable in the sense that the caste Hindus and the depressed classes must come together, understand each other and work together for the upliftment of the downtrodden. The depressed classes cannot achieve what they want by remaining isolated, and the caste Hindus should not look down upon the depressed classes on account of their low birth. Anand believes that the coming together of Bhikhu and Dhooli Singh is an indication of the dream coming true. What brings these two together is their philosophical belief in the concept of work.
Both Dhooli Singh and Bhikhu strongly believe in the dignity of labour and they also put it into practice. Unmindful of all threats and obstacles, they successfully build the road. Understandably Bhikhu loves to sing the song of Kabir that insists on the importance of work, because through work all sins are washed away.

The depressed classes are caught in the cobweb of poverty and social degradation. They can secure social status and gain economic freedom only through the gospel of work. A new social dynamism through work based on co-operative endeavour is what Anand has in his vision. He is interested in collective social action.

Thakur Singh, the landlord, devises a strategy to frustrate the project of the construction of the road. He even tries to excommunicate Dhooli Singh with the help of the local priest Pandit Suraj Mani. Suraj Mani objects the proposed marriage between the children of Thakur Singh and Dhooli Singh. Pandit Suraj Mani and Thakur Singh invoke the theory of karma to keep the people in a state of perennial obeisance to them. Balarama Gupta rightly observes that caste and karma are two weapons invented by mankind to keep the people in perennial subservience to high caste people.

The message of the novel is delivered in the following passage, which is a short conversation between Lakshmi and her son Bhikhu.

‘Son, we are at fault’, Lakshmi said. ‘Join hand to them all and obey them. Don’t fight….’ And she turned to the superior ones, saying: ‘Have pity on Bhikhu. He is a hot headed boy!.... And we will not go the temple if you think we pollute it.....!’

“Ma- what are you saying?’ Bhikhu protested.
‘Son, we are chamars’, she tried to persuade him. ‘And they are twice born’
‘One is a leather worker by profession and not by birth!’ Bhikhu shouted. (6)
Lakshmi, who is a staunch believer of non-resistance, submits a two-fold plea and discourages his righteous action born of his existential choice. She tells Bhikhu that he should be moderate, and at the same time requests the caste Hindus that they should be kind to her son. Later on, in keeping with her non-resistance, she only considers the burning of the huts as a divine punishment for her lapse in worshipping the goddess. Her devotion forces her to enter the temple, but Sajnu’s conservation based on his hatred for the low-born woman does not permit her entry.

Sajnu is the son of Chandri Thakur Singh who is the highest of the village by caste and rank and having the ownership of twenty acres of land. His wealth and high caste status add arrogance to his words and behaviour. He has no sign of good culture to appreciate Lakshmi’s devotion to God and respect for religion. Lakshmi, of course, consoles herself saying that ‘chamars’ [leather workers] do not have the good destiny to enjoy, while at the same time the high caste Hindus should be more considerate in their attitude towards them. She believes that continuous good deeds will elevate the low-born to higher status. This is, in fact, in tune with what Gandhi has said. Gandhi has said that the untouchables should give up their dirty habits and evolve themselves steadily into a new race of men of perfection. Lakshmi’s view that virtuous deeds can erase their low status is to be appreciated as a means of removing the social stigma. Bhikhu represents the humanistic tenets of Anand. But Lakshmi believes in God and religion, which her son distrusts.

Karma and fatalism do not provide sufficient motivation for action and Bhikhu believes in human effort and not in the blind belief in God. That is why he is not worried about Lakshmi’s wish to enter the temple. His question is why a person’s entry into the temple should be a great preoccupation in the scheme of life.
When Bhikhu is thirsty, he announces his entry into the house of Thakur Singh with a request for water; Rukmani gives him some water in a brass vessel. Sajnu expresses his irritation at this act of Rukmani and cries out: “Bhikhu chamar!... How can you touch the brass up and soil for ever! Have you no thought of your status?” (95). Bhikhu is infuriated. Though he has the strength to pulverize Sajnu, the realisation of his status keeps him calm. “But instantly he remembered he was a chamar, untouchable and controlled himself” (95).

Bhikhu moves on the road to Delhi where the question of caste never arises. His exit shows his speculative wish for a perfect coming together of the caste Hindus and harijans on the basis of mutual trust and understanding. He leaves the place for Delhi only in a state of frustration because his longing for a mutual co-operation between the two classes remains unrealised. His departure from the village need not be taken as his failure to face the issue or escape from the problem, because six thousand years of caste division cannot be wiped out in a day. It requires a long passage of time and transition and Bhikhu’s departure looks for a time gap for the need of the change in the minds of the people. The title of the novel *The Road* thus becomes a symbol. In the words of K.N. Sinha, “The road thus stands for the way out of hell one has built for himself, Bhikhu visualizes, for custom, superstition and habit hang like a dead weight, clouding one’s vision. The golden dream of a classless society may remain in the realm of possibility” (75).

The title *The Road* may be taken as symbolic of various interpretations. It is a symbolic protest against the concepts of karma and fatalism. It initiates man’s faith in the glory of human endeavour. It is symbolic of the use of machine which lessens the drudgery of work. The Buddhist notions of salvation through ethical perfection through work and the Buddhist canon that purity of good deeds presupposes the purity
of good thoughts are also symbolized by the title of the novel. The Road also represents a period of transition where the old order of the Hindu beliefs in untouchability will change, yielding to a new vision of human unity and co-operation. The title also looks to the time gap needed for the change in the human mind for the vision of the coming together of the Harijans and the caste Hindus. The road is a journey to the unknown place, a striving towards an ideal which is yet to become possible. It is also a speculative wish for the disappearance of unwanted and dehumanizing customs, habits and superstitions.

Premila Paul observes,

The road to progress that will put an end to the isolation of the village and bring it into the main stream of national life can become meaningful only with the true emancipation of the untouchable since the dispossession of a large section of society cannot co-exist with the emancipation of the whole society that is sought to be realized. (24)

The ending of the novel with the hero heading for the capital of India remains a mystery. Bhikhu’s choice to leave the village and merge into the anonymity of Delhi is puzzling. Being an untouchable, he must have “lived on insults and got used to them” (24). But his defiant nature causes him to make an attempt to escape from them.

The only explanation for the exit of Bhikhu may be that when he sees that the construction of the road elicits insult instead of appreciation from people like Sajnu, he realises the futility of his endeavour and infers that the real progress is impossible for them without the removal of the distinction between the caste Hindus and the untouchables. Bhikhu is not sure what is in store for him in Delhi, but knows that
there are no caste distinctions in Delhi. His decision to get dissolved in Delhi’s vastness is motivated by the existential choice he prefers to get out of the evil.

Bakha in *Untouchable* returns home in order to announce the possible hope offered by the modern machine. On the contrary, Bhikhu, “the ‘mentor of his class’ as K.M.Sinha calls him, fails to think in terms of his community or village. In a fit of despair, he seeks salvation for himself and escapes into modernity. The road to Delhi, therefore, appears to be the road to freedom from caste oppression” (25).

The theme of the predicament of the socially oppressed is also dealt with by Imayam in his novel *Koveru Kazhudaigal (Beasts of Burden)*.

*Koveru Kazhudaigal*, translated as *Beasts of Burden* by Lakshmi Holmstrom, is *Imayam’s* first novel with Arokkyam, a washerwoman, as the central character. The primary theme is Arokkyam’s dilemma within the changing systems of belief about the self and society which leads to despair at the end.

At the beginning of the novel Arokkyam, her husband Savuri, elder son Josep, daughter-in-law Sahayam, daughter Mary and younger son Peter were all planning for a trip to their ancestral church of St. Anthony. Savuri was uneasy with their plan because he could only abide the company of Periyaan, the elder of leather workers. As it was just about the end of the month *Thai* [a month in Tamil], it was the season for work; so he found no pleasure in accompanying them.

Arokkyam requested the elders to grant permission for the trip. Though they declined at first, finally they agreed. As the preparation work for the pilgrimage, she made the *kootaanchoru* [a dish of rice cooked with a variety of vegetables] with all kinds of lentils in a base of millet and packed it. They reached Melnariappanur, the place where the church was located and where they had celebrated the wedding of Josep and Sahayam a year before. After the long break this was their next visit to their
holy shrine. And to their disappointment they heard that the priest was not at the church and he would come only in the afternoon. The whole family knelt before the holy image and after that got sheltered under the shade of a neem tree while Arokkyam was still on her knees.

The thoughts of her community and family kept surfacing in her mind one after another. The whole family enjoyed the kootaanchoru, but Arokkyam refused as her heart was heavy. As the priest was not there, all her hopes had wilted away and she took it as an ill omen. She blamed Savuri for that, as he was the one who was not interested in the trip from the beginning.

Mary rolled the kottaanchoru into balls and placed it on each stretched out palm of the family members. Mary had been a worry to Arokkyam from the moment of her birth because she alone had caught all types of diseases and suffered a lot during her childhood. When Arokkyam used to go to the thorappaadu, a water-hole dug into the river bed, where they did washing, Josep took care of Mary and Peter at home. As Mary grew older, she took charge of Peter and the household work, and that paved way for Josep to assist his parents.

One morning when Mary had gone to collect the washing clothes from the Main Street, a quarrel had broken between herself and Chadayan as he had teased Mary. Arokkyam worried that how times had changed to such an extent that even people like Chadayan, who was a kothukkar [mason], were tormenting low-caste girls. Her anger made her weep. Mary burst into tears and complained that even old men with white moustache made suggestive remarks at her and kindled her anger. She suggested shifting the family somewhere, a place a bit better than that. Arokkyam counselled Mary that people of their community were facing that sort of insults even before their time. They had to bear the brunt of verbal attack to ensure survival. So
she advised her daughter to “make your heart as hard as stone” (Imayam, Beasts of Burden 7) Arokkyam’s heart was heavy and filled with concern for Mary who needed a man.

The very next day Peter was beaten by some street lads. He complained about that to Arokkyam and said that all the boys tormented him by calling out ‘raachoru’ [food for the night] and ‘vannanlad’ [a male whose occupation is washing clothes] (7, 8). He asked his mother why they could not go for coolie work or gain a bit of land as others. These worries and insults of her children made Arokkyam weep throughout the night. “There was nothing in all this that was new to Arokkyam. It had been the same in her own town; it was the same here. It had always been the same since the day that she had arrived in these parts” (8). Her times were not quite like this, nor did people at that time would behave as today. Nowadays even small children could call her ‘vannaati woman’ [female dhobi]. “We are a humble community. What’s the use of getting angry? She would forget about the incident immediately. It was important for her to put it right out of her mind. Otherwise she would have gone mad. It was only by forgetting that she survived” (9). She chose to bear the shame silently than rebelling or even questioning it. She used to accept her low-born status without any complaint.

Arokkyam also felt sorry for Joseph who used to keep quiet for the angry shouts of Sahayam, and pitied him for having gained such a termagant as his wife. Both Sahayam and Arokkyam were always at loggerheads. Her hopes had shattered more when she heard that Sahayam had planned to settle in Chinnnasalem with Josep. Arokkyam’s peace was destroyed whenever she thought of the present troubles of family. She wanted to get some solace and also advice of the priest and that was why, she had gone with her family to her ancestral church.
After hours, the priest appeared but paid no response to see people waiting for his arrival. Sahayam and Peter did not like the priest. Arokkyam decided to tell all her grievances and troubles to the priest, as she felt that he was her Saamiyaar [clergyman]. She also planned to invite the priest to the town and to speak to the members of the panchayat [body of villagers which settles disputes according to custom and good conscience] for the betterment of her family status.

Peter’s words showed that he had no faith in God. He argued that Jesus was an ordinary man like lots of men in town, and that he was not to be worshipped by the people. Arumugam, a friend of Peter, had taught all these new things to him. He pointed out to Sahayam that some elders used to kick their holy images made of clay with their feet while playing. And he asked why God had failed to pull their eyes out. He further added that those elders, who smoked bidis [processed tobacco rolled up on dry tender leaf for smoking] and blew the smoke at God’s back used to ask why God failed to tear their mouths. Arokkyam scolded him as he had no fear of God. Peter treated only Sahayam with respect and for her part she liked only Peter in their family.

Arokkyam went near the Saamiyaar while he was continually swinging from one side to another in his swivel chair. She started complaining to him that additional payment for specific pieces of work undertaken on special occasions and the fixed annual allowances were getting reduced by the people day by day.

They pick a quarrel over the least thing. They don’t give us the tavasam [ceremony in honour of a deceased parent or relative] as they used to in the old days. The padi [a container used for measuring grains] from each house is miserable. And in the rituals they forget all about their vannaan. Everything is lost, aandavare [Oh! God]. In the evenings, our bowls are not filled. (17)
The priest seemed to be very indolent to the words of Arokkyam as he smoked the cigarette and blew out the smoke with relish that formed set of rings. Arokkyam called him to meet the panchayat. The priest promised to come one day and asked her to visit the church often and participate in poojas [adoration of deities with proper rituals such as lighting lamps, chanting mantras etc.] so that God would show mercy. Arokkyam believed that their difficulties and distresses would vanish very soon. By the time they entered their town, it was dinner time. Josep and Arokkyam took the vessels and raced towards the colony to receive food.

Ramasaami, the joint head of the panchayat and the leader of the colony, rushed to Savuri’s house the very next dawn after they had visited the church. He informed that his mother Ramaayi, the old lady in the town, had passed away. The rituals and rites were to be performed earlier. Ramasaami himself was an old man and would die at anytime. Ramaayi’s death had caused no grief among the family and village members as she was the oldest person in the town. It was a good death and that would not disturb even a single soul. It was the duty of washerman’s family to be engaged in all ritual rites of the death.

Savuri was not given even a single moment to spare for himself. He collected some cow dung and made it a ball and drenched the wick in oil and planted it with the help of stick in middle of the cow dung ball. He also tucked an incense stick to one side. As per the instruction given by Savuri, Ramasaami broke the coconut facing westward. Savuri took one half of the coconut as his share. Even though Savuri had not taken any food since the morning, he felt a sudden spurt of joy on looking at the performance of thamru-melam [two-headed drum] drummers. Arokkyam was eager to receive the rice offered to washerman’s family at the time of performing funeral rites. When she heard of the death, she hoped for a meal of rice alone, without having
mixed with other grains. As per the custom, the entire family of Arokkyam fell to the
ground and received their share of grains too at the time of funeral rites.

After every visit to Antony’s church the townsfolk would ask Arokkyam about her
journey and experience. But this time very few people asked her to about the journey.
Arokkyam replied them in distress. “It’s not even worth asking about, akka [elder
sister]. Even before the mouthful one spat out was dry, we were back, I tell you; as
quickly as if a bomb had gone off behind us. What pilgrimage has brought us any
good anyway” (50).

Usually at the time of harvest the whole people of the town used to engage
themselves with work and be busy from day break till night fall. Dancers, street
performers, Thombans [street acrobat], Kaavadi bearers [devotees who bear on
shoulders a wooden rod joined by semi circular wooden strip to both ends to which
offerings are tied] would perform their duties and collect grain from the people as
reward. No soul in the town would remain idle. The jobs awaited each person
according to his age and work. Even the crippled and the lame were used to guard the
drying grains. At festival time, people were busy walking between fields and home.
Arokkyam had to winnow the grain at each house. This was the season for Arokkyam
to earn her annual income. It was the duty of Savuri and Arokkyam to serve nearly
two hundred families in the town. They both worked restless. And for the sake of
survival Arokkyam tried to address the town people with familiarity as mama [uncle],
appa [father], anna [elder brother], amma [mother], akka [elder sister], and atthai
[aunt] during the period of harvest, even though they showered harsh words and
insults. She went to serve from house to house without any rest.

But things had changed nowadays because people did their own winnowing and no
longer waited for Savuri and Sahayam. And in case of heavy work they started to
engage hired labourers. Arokkyam was worried that if this existed, she would receive only her annual allowances of grain and not the benefit of harvest time awards. When Josep had joined them at the winnowing it was possible to winnow in two houses simultaneously. Chadayan and Azhagan, both heads of the town, insisted Arokkyam and Savuri for winnowing in their farms. Arokkyam was in turmoil as both families were important in the colony. Savuri winnowed in Azhagan’s place while Josep and Mary were in Chadayan’s place. As the result of working the whole day in hot sunny climate Savuri had turned completely dark. As he was growing old he lacked his former energy. Following her work at Azhagan’s place Arokkyam went to Chadayan’s in order to assist Josep in winnowing.

Once Azhagan worked as a bonded labourer under Subbu Gaunder, while Karuppaayi was a servant at Gaunder’s daughter Niramani’s house. Gaunder spent a lot of his money on the marriage between Azhagan and Karuppaayi. After marriage Karuppaayi started working with her husband at Gaunder’s house. As Karuppaayi was a pretty woman with fair skin, it attracted Gaunder and paved way to develop a ‘certain’ relationship with her. One fine day Karuppaayi succeeded in getting a field from Gaunder by the stream and this threshing floor as a gift when he was in his deathbed. The whole townsfolk were aware of this tricky act.

After the work was over at Azhagan’s farm, Savuri and Arokkyam were asked to scoop their share. When Savuri was about to measure their share with the muram [wide mouthed winnowing pan] they used for winnowing, Azhagan interrupted and gave an old, threadbare, partly split muram in which Karuppaayi used to gather rubbish. The entire attitude of Azhagan and Karuppaayi had changed after the work was completed. Savuri and Arokkyam had realized that the sugar coated words spoken by them right from the morning were just to extract the work from them.
Arokkyam felt disappointed because they had worked the whole day until their waists were broken and joints ached, but the well-off people were not generous enough to pay the due and rightful wages to the poor. They even reduced their regular three measures to two and thus started a new custom. Arokkyam struggled and argued at her best. But finally Azhagan’s harsh words paid no hope and justice. And so they left the place in distress.

The very night Arokkyam started collecting food from street to street. And she walked towards Azhagan’s threshing floor while he came along with a cart full of bundles of grain. When Arokkyam stepped to one side to leave the way, she heard the words of a man who walked behind the cart that, “The vannaati woman is coming opposite us. It’s certainly an auspicious sign. Next year the crops should be good” (69). Ignoring it Arokkyam worried about their life condition and believed that unless the priest spoke to the panchayat they could not shine anymore. She trusted that the church’s intervention would sustain the old order by appealing to the elders of the colony to keep up their caste obligations to their vannan.

As the messenger from Chinnasalem reported that Sahayam’s brother was not doing well, Sahayam and Josep left for Chinnasalem against the wishes of Arokkyam and had not returned even after some months, as they had settled there. One day Susai Manikkam, Sahaya Mary’s younger uncles’s son from Nariappanur, visited Arokkyam’s house in order to invite them for Anthoniamma’s marriage. Once there was an assumption among all that Josep would marry this Anthoniamma. It was only Arokkyam in the family who had shown interest in accepting Sahaya Mary. But now she thought that she might have brought Anthoniamma as her daughter-in-law. Any how she was always very proud about the beauty of Sahayam and used to admire it secretly. As Sahayam was from the town she was interested in watching cinemas and
decorating herself with cosmetics. She would never help Arokkyam in washing or doing house hold works or even in collecting the meal from the colony streets. Arokkyam was always worried and struck with fear about the welfare her family members as Sahayam was not taking any responsibility.

Arokkyam was lost in the thought of her son Josep and his future in the hands of Sahayam. She longed to see him and wondered if Josep had truly been an affectionate and loving son, how Sahayam could have so easily made him leave his mother and go with her to Chinnasalem.

My child is lost.

My innocent child, heaven knows how he is getting on.

He ran away like the running stream, murderous chandaalan [used as a term of abuse – a cruel person].

How can the snot become the nose?

What use are a thousand men, an army, a crowd, a gathering?

O my first-born son!

I tended a tender green parrot

I lost it in flight

I bred a baby parrot

I lost it in its bird-call. (86)

As Josep was the eldest child, Arokkyam brought him up with loving care. Savuri’s four younger sisters and three younger brothers were not married at that time; they vied with one another for their opportunity to carry Josep. But Peter and Mary had grown up by themselves in an ordinary way without much care as Josep. Even after his marriage, Josep was very dependent upon his mother and survived under her care. And so this was the reason for her worries about her dear son, who
was persuaded by his wife to leave home and had got partnership with his brother-in-law to start a laundry business in the town.

My beautiful son

My golden child

My beloved son, how shall I know about you

O Saint Anthony. (90)

Arokkyam continued to cry for the whole night in the thought of her beloved son.

After three days of severe fever Arokkyam got ready to collect the clothes in the colony much against the wishes of Mary. As soon as she entered the colony, the heartless people of the colony started complaining about her absence. Arokkyam collected washing clothes from house to house while Peter gathered and tied them together. When she reached the last street where the Kothukkarān [mason] Chadayan lived, her legs started to tremble as she felt like fainting. So he asked Peter to collect the clothes from the remaining houses.

As requested by Arokkyam, Savuri had gone to look for Josep at Chinnasalem. Arokkyam had also planned to send him to meet the priest after his return. As there was no alternative Arokkyam sent Mary to collect clothes from the main streets much against her wishes. Arokkyam recalled that how previously one day Mary reported that Natesan’s son Sivarman had come to speak to Mary on his behalf. But Mary had refused that offer saying,

‘I don’t know how to weep inside the water. You come with the story of an elephant marrying a mouse. You can drink the water from a running stream, or bathe in it, that’s all; what else can you do with running water? Is it enough for a beggar boy to have big eyes? Even dreams have to be appropriate to the eyes.’ (94)
Arokkyam felt that Mary had driven away the son of such a man since the people had changed completely. All situations of yesteryear were entirely in straight contrast to that of present time. And so the poor girl had missed the golden opportunity.

The entire lifestyle of Mary had been changed within the few days of Arokkyam’s illness. She engaged herself in collecting clothes, washing and delivering them and doing domestic chores. And so she was totally exhausted. Mary felt her heart breaking when she entered Chadayan’s street to collect clothes. Her breath started draining while getting near his house. When Chadayan called her, his very bullying tone frightened her entirely. She was always terrified by his very presence. As he was a Kothukkaran, a long-established resident of the colony, all Kothukkaarer and Karaikkaarer were in his hands. Unfortunately as Chadayan’s wife Amaravati was not at home, he found that to be right opportunity to fulfil his thirst.

Mary never came there alone as this before, as Arokkyam would always ask Peter to accompany her. Out of fear she chanted her prayers to Saint Anthony of Melnariappanur. Chadayan’s house was the only house in the town with rooms upstairs. As Chadayan approached her closer and closer Mary was completely paralyzed with fear. She was trapped in the last corner of the room where old bundles and luggage were placed. His grip on Mary was tightened and she had no way to escape. She started pleading with him, using very appealing words, but all in vain, because they all fell into deaf ears.

It’s the vannaati, saami [respectful term of address or reference to a man]

I’m a woman who will soon be married, saami

My whole family will be ruined, saami

I could become pregnant, saami

I’ll kill myself, saami
I touch your feet, ayya

Think of me as the daughter of your own body, ayya [Sir]

If you want, you can kill me, burn me to ashes

O Saint Anthony

O God O Saint Anthony O Mother Mary. (101)

Much against Mary’s protest and pleading words Chadayan seduced her. She crouched herself at the corner of the house and wept aloud, beating the ground angrily with her fists. She walked along the colony road like a corpse. The sweat rolled off from her body and made her completely wet.

As Arokkyam’s family was the lowest servicing clan for the whole town for generations, Mary had even controlled her tone and sobbed silently with distress. She thought that if the incident was revealed, the townsfolk would blame only the low caste family and chase them away out of the town. She wondered that from a family of washer man community how they alone belonged to Christian faith, and being a Christian they did not experience any transformation in their life style. Arokkyam understood the whole fact from the very sight of Mary’s ceaseless and terrible weeping. She could not bear the pain while her daughter sobbed in distress.

O God O God

God should have led her, but even he has no eyes. Now he has destroyed and betrayed us.

Is he likely to rub off and re-write the fate he wrote for us at the moment of our making?

Is this like a head-load that we can remove or change?

Our lives have changed forever

Saint Anthony
O God O God

Blind God, without eyes to see. (103)

Arokkyam decided to hide the unpleasant incident from the world including Savuri. She blamed her own life as a sin and grumbled out in distress. “She could not be at peace any more. Her treasure had been looted from her. The one thing that she wanted to protect and cherish had been destroyed. Now there was nothing left. Except darkness within” (104).

Savuri had returned from Chinnasalem but nobody enquired or uttered a single word about Josep and Sahayam. Savuri himself calculated that Mary and Arokkyam might have had a quarrel. Mary did not have her meal and Arokkyam arrived near Mary’s bed for four or five times in the night and lay by her side with loving care and concern. She was terribly worried about Mary’s future.

The next day Diraviyaraj, Savuri’s nephew, came to inform about his mother Therasa’s ill health. Arokkyam was the sister of Diraviyaraj’s father. Years back when Diraviyaraj’s father died, Arokkyam had brought Diraviyaraj with her and fed him. It was because Theresa, his mother, had developed an illicit affair with her brother-in-law after the death of her husband, and that existed for ten years, after which he deserted her. Six years ago as Theresa’s health started worsening she sought the help of Diraviyaraj to take care of her. Therefore, Arokkyam had to send Diraviyaraj against her will to take care of his sick mother.

Now, when he came it was nearly some five or six years since he had left Arokkyam’s house. During his early stay at Arokkyam’s house, he and Mary would ride their donkey on their way to Thorrappadu with Arokkyam. They both had laughed and fought for sweet nothings.
After a long break, when he came now, Mary was alone. Diraviyaraj stood dumb-founded. They both looked at each other intently and remained speechless. Diraviyaraj looked at her as if he would swallow her. He stood silent for a while and sat at a little distance from her. Mary adjusted her dress which was ridden above her knee. She felt shy and engaged herself in mending a blanket. Diraviyaraj wanted to converse with Mary as he did in his childhood days but she maintained a distance as if he were a stranger to her. She tried to avoid Diraviyaraj. Suddenly the thought of her bitter experience with the brutal Chadayan made her weep bitterly.

After some time, he went to Thoroppaadu to see Arokkyam, who on seeing him, gathered him up and kissed him with affection and was shocked to hear that Theresa was counting her days. Diraviyaraj learnt that Arokkyam’s health was not good as before after Josep had left the house. And their life had been getting worse after the arrival of a tailor and the opening of a new laundry. Diraviyaraj could not believe all these things.

The new laundry man Periasaami and the tailor Saibu’s arrival troubled Arrokkyam a lot. She wondered how the townsfolk forgot their vannan’s family who had been depending upon them for generations to win their bread. She thought that the people had changed completely. She walked through the street of the colony in order to renew her duties.

‘Don’t forget the vannaati woman, saami.’

It’s your paraya-vannaati, saami.’

‘Yes, yes saami.’

It’s your paraya-vannaati, Arokkyam.’

‘Don’t forget the vannaati from the paraya household.’

‘Yes, saami.’

‘Keep me in mind, aandavare.’(135)
Before the arrival of the tailor there were always bundles of clothes to be mended that stood in heaps in her house. But now there was no way to make fair amount by mending clothes because the work was given to the new tailor. Only a few old people in the village continued to send their clothes to their caste vannan for washing while others started the habit of sending the clothes to the new laundry. The family’s income started to decrease rapidly.

Whenever Savuri and Periyaan found time to be together, they would sit at the threshold of Savuri’s house and chat for hours. Periyaan was the oldest among them. He used to share his fruitful life experience to Savuri, and that was the one and only soothing medicine for Savuri to forget his day’s burden. And Periyaan too enjoyed the company of Savuri at the most as he was the only soul who spared time with him.

Soon Therasa died leaving Dhiraviyaraj all alone. His uncle and aunt could not bear to see his plight, and they wanted to get him married to Mary. So, they spoke to Arokkyam and got her willingness. As it was the month of Thai, Arrokkyam was busy in storing all regular payments of grain and perks they received from winnowing. With this heavy toil, Mary’s wedding work also made her as busy as a bee. As the grain got accumulated, she started selling it to make money. She also managed to add some more money by selling goats. The town people had presented thaali [a sacred jewel tied by the bridegroom to the bride at the time of marriage], a quarter sovereign worth, as the gift to Josep on his marriage. But this time as Mary was a girl going elsewhere after marriage and as there was no trace of hope that she would serve them any more, they were not ready to offer any gift. As Diraviyaraj was not in a position to get a thali of his own, Arokkyam took the charge of getting it at her own cost.

Mary’s house was busy with relatives and the meal was getting ready for the wedding guests. Mary’s friend Rani who belonged to upper caste visited Mary’s
house secretly in order to greet her friend. She came with some clothes for mending as usual as the excuse to meet her friend. She got into Mary’s house after observing around and making sure that she was not noticed by anyone. In the same way, it was only Rani’s house that Mary could enter in the entire town and that too in secret. Rani presented her jacket to Mary as her gift. Tears flowed from Mary’s eyes. Rani too wept openly uttering that she hoped herself to get married earlier than Mary, so that Rani could seek a bridegroom for her friend Mary at her town and so that they might settle in the same place together. But they were not lucky for that. One of the wedding guests expressed in delight that, “Do these people actually come inside our houses? Can there be such friendship? Not bad; our bridegroom is a lucky fellow then!”(164).

The wedding took place and the elders blessed the wedded couple. Diraviyaraj took Mary with him. Arokkyam, though deprived of the nearness of her daughter, was happy that she had gone to live with her husband. She used to think of her daughter whenever she had good food to eat. However, Mary had not returned even once after her marriage to see her mother. She struggled hard to manage washing and doing household works solitarily without the support of Mary.

Few months had passed after Mary’s wedding. As there was no rain in the town the people suffered from severe famine. While surrounding areas were blessed with ample rain here their place alone appeared bare like a cremation ground. They had already summoned various pujaris [priest in temples who officiates at ceremonies like poojas/wedding] including Datchinamurti Ayyar to offer prayers and find solution for their sufferings. It was he who had prophesied at the time of sowing, “This year the god is riding on a pig; the darker grains should yield plentifully” (176). The whole predictions, omens and portents proved false. Finally, the whole town gathered in front of Mariamman [Goddess] temple to conduct prayer in order to
receive rain. To get relieved from the drought as per the olden belief, they planned to
sacrifice a pig as an offering to the Lord.

‘Yes, it is the gods complaining. Once we have made a blood sacrifice,
cooked the offering, and taken out the god in procession, we’ll see. The next
day the rains will pour down in all their strength. There is no other
way.’(177)

The whole town was in a festive mood. Peter was eager to have a good meal.
Arokkyam was also expecting to receive the head and entrails of the pig as their share.
But to their disappointment the people were not as before and were not ready to offer
anything. When Arokkyam asked her rights “Saami, please don’t misunderstand me.
But hasn’t it always been the custom, whenever a goat or a pig is slaughtered, to give
the head and the entrails to the vannaan?”(181). They replied that they could offer
their vannan only on festival days and not on all occasions. Arokkyam was bold
enough in opposing them with her words “Would it be enough, Saami, if I only did
your washing on Pongal [the festival celebrated on the first day of the Tamil month
Thai] and Deepavali [a festival of lights] days?”(182). Mottayyan among the crowd
was in great rage against Arokkyam and shouted harsh words at her. Though
Arokkyam was in a fury against him, she was shaken and terrified inwardly.
Arokkyam alone strived for her rights while Savuri stood quietly with his feet
together and arms folded as a token of his respect to the whole townsfolk while Peter
as a small and innocent boy kept twisting his mother’s saree in fear.

When Peter tried to take a peek at the basket of entrails, Arokkyam shouted at him
and continued to mutter to herself. “All the good taste ends at the throat; after that it’s
shit. I had better just go away now, like the dog that has seen too much and has been
whipped across the mouth” (186).
Arokkyam’s worries were increased more day by day when the dinner meal offered to them was rapidly getting decreased. Sometimes it had barely sufficed for a single person. She was forced to cook herself in every evening. It was not the situation in former times; the whole family used to have stomachful and sometimes it would be enough for the next day’s mid day meal.

One rainy day, the priest’s cook visited Savuri’s house when Arokkyam returned home after collecting the dinner meal. The cook conveyed the information that the priest wanted to make Peter a priest like him. The offer would provide education for Peter, chances to travel around the world and above all an opportunity to serve God. Arokkyam, who was truly shocked, spoke all her worries and concerns to the cook. She explained that Peter was the only comfort left for her after Josep and Mary had left the house. He was the only soul to take care of them in their old age. Arokkyam was sure that wealth and comfort would not compete with the presence of their dear one with them. So she humbly declined the offer.

Arokkyam also asked herself:

Joseph, Sahayam and Mary - what would all of them think? Would they say to her, you have knowingly kicked away the goddess of fortune, now what are we to do? Or would they say, no, never, we don’t care even if we starve; whether we live or die, let us stay within our nest? (201)

When the cook asked for her decision, Arokkyam told him: “We have always spent our days together as mother and child. However many countries we roam, whatever authority we acquire, one day we put a handful of earth in our mouths, and become one with the earth” (203). She stood stubborn that she needed a blood relation to stand near her corpse after her death. The cook tried to impress her saying that the
offer was rare and would give good fortune. “Don’t condemn him to wash clothes for
the rest of his life” (206).

Soon after the cook met them, Arokkyam suffered from cold and fever for five
days. She had not gone for washing or even for collecting clothes. The anxiety that
the priest could meet her in person at any time increased her fever. To the excitement
of Arokkyam, Peter, who was then just a very small boy of twelve, answered
Arokkyam that he could never be a priest but he would go to Chennai.

Minakshi’s daughter, Sakuntala, had menstruated eight days ago. And so they
fixed a dritti [the ritualistic ceremony for a girl attaining puberty] ceremony for her to
dispel the evil eyes. Even though Arokkyam was not well she wanted to visit
Minakshi’s house so that she would receive enough rice and tasty curry, that would
last for two days. So she insisted Peter to go. It was the duty of vannan family to
wash the clothes of the girl who attained puberty. Arokkyam washed Sakuntala’s
clothes in thorappadu for the first three days and as she fell ill she washed them at
home that had been sent. Savuri would never wash the polluted clothes like this
category. In olden days Arokkyam used to receive a new sari for the occasional duties
like child’s birth and girl’s menstruation. She herself got ready to go to Minakshi’s
house with Peter by carrying large vessels and they walked in dark where wet mud
was knee-deep and rubbish floated. On the way Arokkyam was much worried about
the priest’s visit and she feared what she would do when the priest himself came in
person. As she was not doing well, she felt difficult to walk. Her sudden thought of
Mary made her feel the need of a girl child at the time of these helpless situations.

When Mary came of age Arokkyam had not been able to provide her good shelter
and healthy food as she was not doing well that time. On the third day itself Mary had
her ceremonial bath and returned home of her own accord. She did the domestic
chores and cooked hot fresh rice for her mother. Arokkyam pitied the poor girl now and decided to send Savuri to fetch Mary home. She cursed that the Lord would punish the fellow who exploited and betrayed her. Her words picture how much she missed her daughter.

No matter how many you bear, no child is like a girl child
She’ll look after you while you live, she’ll see to you when you die
She’ll rinse out the cloth you wrap about you
She’ll think of you because you carried her in your womb
When you stand before her, broken down and worn out she’ll give you a bowl of gruel
A woman is always a woman. (213)

When once Arokkyam sent Savuri to see Josep, they looked after him with care and comfort during his stay in Chinnasalem. Josep and Sahayam earnestly asked the entire family to stay with them.

Minakshi offered whole heartedly a huge amount of rice, brinjal curry and different poriyals [vegetables or egg prepared by seasoning and frying with a little quantity of oil] to Arokkyam and Arokkyam gave her a wide smile in return as gratitude. It was only to Minakshi that Arokkyam spoke of her troubles. Arokkyam used to wash the clothes of Minakshi’s house with particular care. And Minakshi also was well loved by all for her fine character. She advised Peter to stay with his parents and take care of them till the end and also asked Arokkyam to look after her health.

The only companion of Savuri, Periyaan the old man, was bed-ridden. And so Savuri missed his company a lot. Arokkyam and Savuri went out to thorappaadu with Peter to dig out the water hole. Arokkyam had already borrowed the spade and shoveling basket the previous day itself. Arokkyam’s ill health did not allow her to
work. But her will power motivated her to the work with renewed energy. Savuri too
grew tired as he had dug up eight cart loads already. They could have hired some one
to dig the pool, but it was not affordable to them, so they did it themselves as they had
no other employment. Peter assisted him by doing petty works at his level. Arokkyam
stood in water to build pool walls. Yearly four or five times they needed to dredge the
pool to deepen it.

Finally, after working for a long time they gave a full shape to the pool which
made Arokkyam quite happy. All the tiredness and hunger vanished from her and she
had a bath to her heart’s content. She rejoiced at the very sight of the little pools of
water that had gathered. She enjoyed collecting crabs with delight and excitement.
The sun started to set in the west. She forgot herself when she thought of the
preparation of delicious crab rasam [a kind of soup prepared by adding certain
condiments to tamarind juice].

Peter who came before them from thorappaadu was not found when they reached
home. Arokkyam prepared the crab rasam with love and care. She searched for Peter
all over the streets thrice. She did not receive any news about him. She sent the boys
to look for him in Mariamman shrine and she herself went into the thorny jungle in
search of him. She waited for him in an agony of suspense for the whole night. Days
and months passed but there was no information about him.

After Periyaan’s death, Savuri was overcome by grief. He became quite reckless
and seemed to be associated with the spirit world and the days moved very slowly.
Arokkyam received a letter from Peter in which he had conveyed about his good state.
She thanked God as Peter was alive. For the past four months, the thoughts of Peter
made her weep every minute saying,

Peteru, Peteru
He’s gone where the wind will take him
My life remained in this block of wood only for his sake
I took courage because I believed he was steadfast
O Saint Anthony. (233)

While her mind wavered to see Peter, there appeared Susila’s husband with hesitation to summon Arokkyam, as his wife suffered from problem in feeding the new-born baby. Arokkyam took the letter with her in order to show that to Susila to hear the content once again. But already Susila was in distress as she had given birth to a baby just twenty two days ago. She was not able to feed her baby as her breasts have turned hard. Arokkyam made her stretch out on her back and rolled a churning stick all over her body to slacken the tightness. When the milk began to flow Arokkyam rubbed her down, wiped her dry and made her lie down. Then she fanned her with the winnowing tray. Susila shed tears with love when her baby sucked the milk. As gratitude, Susila offered Arokkyam a big vessel full of *varagu rice* [common millet], along with tamarind, salt and chilies. Arokkyam asked Susila to take care of her baby and her health.

The good news that Sahayam gave birth to a male baby four months ago and that Mary conceived made Arokkyam fly with joy. It was just a week to *Pongal* and the time for winnowing the harvest. The condition was not good as they did not get the expected amount of winnowing work. Even the previous year seemed to be better than the current situation. Arokkyam had planned earlier to receive certain amount of money by selling their share of grains that they had already collected. She had planned to get silver waist chains for Mary’s baby and Josep’s son. The grains were sold only for half a price as there was no demand. The money she got would not be enough to buy even a single chain.
Arokkyam’s heart had completely broken when she overheard the complaint from the people that her washing was not as good as earlier and she showed interest in collecting washing clothes only during festival days but never failed to collect her food regularly.

The advent of Pongal made people busy themselves with their preparatory work. Arokkyam lamented as her children were not with her. Usually Mary used to whitewash the home with slaked lime for every Pongal. And Arokkyam also moaned as Josep was not with her for four Pongals. Last year Peter was with them. So this Pongal was not a happy occasion as usual. She collected the festival foods like idli [food made by steaming the dough of rice and blackgram], paniyaaram [ball shaped or small disc shaped snack made of sweetened rice flour] and kozhukkattai [pastry-like rice-flour preparation with filling sweetened, grated coconut] from various houses and sank herself in the thought of her children. She knew that Mary cared for rice paniyaraam, Sahayam savory vadai [cutlet-like snack made of lentil and fried in oil] and Josep chola paniyaaram [made of sorghum or jower flour]. She very much longed to see them all.

When Mary had visited her parents for delivery and stayed for two months, Josep and Sahayam came to see the baby. Josep lamented over his mother’s health condition. He pointed that she had grown thin. He fell into her lap and wept aloud. Arokkyam gazed at Josep’s changed appearance in his dhoti and shirt like a young Chieftain with moustache. Sahayam remained as the same; Mary also had grown thin. When Arokkyam asked Josep to be back to his home town, they all complained about the present condition of the town that Arokkyam and Savuri returned home with empty vessels every evening, and the washing clothes had also started decreasing and there was no way to get any alternate income there in their home town. In turn Josep
and Sahayam invited Arokkyam, Savuri and Peter to settle down with them. Savuri and Peter too agreed but Arokkyam was not ready to leave her native town and townsfolk.

While Arokkyam was deeply stirred by these thoughts of her children, somebody came to summon her for a critical delivery. She immediately forgot her own worries and rushed with the informer immediately without minding the late night. As it was Chitra’s first delivery, a girl of just fourteen years, the delivery seemed to be critical. After witnessing Arokkyam’s arrival the women at home looked more hopeful.

‘Is there anything the vannaati doesn’t know? She has seen all the women of the town through their deliveries.’

‘Yes, I tell you.’

‘Everything will be all right if she gives a hand.’

‘Yes, she has an auspicious hand.’

‘What would happen to us without this woman? We would fetch up as corpses, that’s all.”

‘True, akka.’

‘Because this woman is in town, we can have some courage in our hearts.’(258)

All had lost their hope as Chitra struggled for long and as no trace of improvement was observed. Arokkyam diagnosed the exact reason that it was the tightness of her flesh that delayed the birth. When Arokkyam pressed the upper belly of Chitra hard, baby’s head appeared. At the fine dawn of very next day Arokkyam gently drew out the girl baby to their surprise. The joy of the people knew no bounds. Arokkyam got exhausted as she had drunk only gruel at previous mid day. While returning Arokkyam heard the remarks from the women that no one could have achieved it
except Arokkyam. These words of appreciation made Arokkyam forget her lack of sleep and physical stress.

When ten days had passed after Pongal, Savuri just recalled his memories. They received nearly ten sheep heads along with huge pongal [rice dish with added sweet or seasoned with pepper, cumin seeds etc.] and paniyaram. Arokkyam prepared the meat with other things and sent it to Josep and Mary through Savuri. He returned with the repeated message that they insisted them to move to Chinnasalem and stay with them.

Days moved on slowly and Arokkyam had lost her sleep and happiness completely. The memory of her children and the changing life style tormented her a lot. She frequently used to wake at midnights.

She called up her memories, as if she were drawing them up from a well, and went over all of them, one by one and again and again. But it was like staring at the sun at midday and then turning one’s gaze to the earth: everything dimmed and blurred to a blackish blue; nothing stood out clearly outlined (271).

She used to make loud laments during midnights, by thinking of Josep, Mary and Peter. She castigated both the laundryman and the tailor, who were the root cause of their family’s downfall. She even complained about the townsfolk who supported the sudden change. The next morning when Arokkyam gathered the clothes to go to thorappaadu, a scorpion stung her. Savuri took her to Datchinamurti Ayyar to have some mantras recited over Arokkyam. Even though the Ayyar had showered his charms and mantras, the pain would last for twenty four hours. When Arokkyam asked Ayyar to predict the reason for toils and troubles of her life, he uttered that the planetary influences were working against them at present and he gave confidence that things would change very soon.
During Amaavaasai, the night of new moon, people cooked some special dishes with different vegetables. So Savuri asked Arokkyam to go for collecting meal but as she refused due to her ill health, he himself rushed out with vessels in hoping to return home with vessel full unlike other days.

Arokkyam was always troubled with the strange sensation in the nights. Her thoughts lingered about her birth, her childhood days, her marriage with Savuri, her services to the large number of family members at that time. Her thoughts would also move towards the changed attitude of townsfolk and the torments and troubles caused by her children and relations, Josep’s migration to Chinnasalem with Sahayam, Mary’s departure after marriage and Peter running away from home. All those worries tormented her a lot. She sobbed the whole night that the family members had chosen their own path by themselves without caring about her or not having any concern for her.

Everything good in my life has gone
My strength has left me
I have no possessions left
Everything has vanished away like smoke, like magic
I had no complaints. (282)

The time moved sluggishly to Arokkyam. In olden days as she had plenty of work to do she used to walk round the colony streets like a busy bee. But now her legs itched and troubled as she had no work to do and no place to go. The townsfolk too had changed in all aspects. New schools were opened, ordinary tea stall had turned into hotels, mud roads had changed to tar roads and water taps had been connected even inside the houses. In those days there would be famine only during failure of
seasonal rains. Even in those days of famine, Arokkyam had managed with her savings. But now the situation was entirely difficult and critical.

Today men were wandering with cropped hair, fashionable shirts and bidi or cigarette in their hands. Even women looked in their trendy dresses and paid interest in watching movies. Josep too had changed in his outward appearance. Arokkyam blamed that Sahayam was the root cause of all the changes and misery. As a result the whole family was being ruined.

Arokkyam had entirely lost all her stamina and strength. She had turned very lean with wrinkled skin and grey hair which appeared as whitewashed. She had an unpleasant dream and feared that it might be an ill omen and something wrong might happen.

Only if a great famine were to come about would this town be entirely ruined.

But if such a famine were to happen, what would people do? Would they roam the country in order to fill their stomachs? Was it only by wandering from place to place that one was able to fill one’s belly? (295)

Arokkyam’s thoughts started wavering with anguish and fear. She had attended so many deaths, but there would be no one at her funeral. Previously she waited for no help from Savuri as she had managed all her works by herself. It was never possible for them to converse as they were too busy. But as things had so entirely changed in these days that they found time to sit and converse together. But their chatting mainly ended in misunderstanding and quarrel. Savuri too had changed a lot in his attitude. He often scolded her and some time even tried to beat her. Usually Savuri hardly took decisions, this time he himself suggested that they should settle with Josep as they had no trace of hope to remain in the hometown as the condition was going from bad to
worse. He told Arokkyam that, if they continued to stay in their home town, no doubt they would die of starving.

‘It’s true. How can people like us who earn our living by wandering about belong to any one place? Who are our kinsfolk? We belong to all towns. All people are ours. Those who have land, property and inherited wealth stay rooted in one place. But is that our destiny? We live on what others give us. We are a humble people.’(302)

Savuri’s words made her weep for long. She realised that they did not belong to the town which she thought it as hers, as they did not own even a single piece of land. She lamented that her own children had gone separately to gratify their own wishes. Previously she was useful to all in a significant way, but now things had taken a different distorted shape. Yesterday seemed like a game that got over and was the puppet that was relegated to backyard. She could not imagine a life without her town and townsfolk. “But this is my town. These are my people. This street, this temple, the trees and plants and creepers surrounding the town are all mine. The goats and cattle, this stream and this thorappaadu- everything belongs to me” (303).

Her eyes swept over the entire stream, every tree and bush. Her ears heard the buzzing and humming of the bees. Savuri called her home and he wondered why she scattered herself in the hot sun. Even he too had changed to be a very old man. Arokkyam lamented.

Half the people in this town fell into my hands the moment they were born. Is there a single person in this town whose pollution I have not cleaned? Is there a woman who has not had trouble suckling her child? Is there a woman whose umbilical cord I have not cut and buried? It was I who answered the summons of each person in this town; I worked for them all.’(305)
Arokkyam had a weird dream in which first she was staying in thorappaadu and after a while she was at a strange place, where she had witnessed a huge banyan tree with flowers and fruits. Suddenly the tree had turned bare and withered. Then again it looked fresh and then turned bare and dry. When leaving the bed in the morning there had been a dead lizard under her pillow. As all these predicted an impending ill omen, she feared that something wrong might happen. She got consoled when she heard the death news of somebody else and got comforted that no relation of her had died. She thanked Saint Anthony of Melnariappanur for it. She also groaned for Savuri’s weakening health condition day by day.

When she saw Savuri with his hunched back, setting off wearily, wrapped in his veshti [dhoti], the tears came welling up. In a little while, the men disappeared as black shadows. The street was empty and dark. Darkness filled everything between the sky and the earth. Even as she stood watching, the darkness descended about her. (307)

The news that Diraviyaraj had died of snake bite during his usual visit to thorappaadu in his town with Mary broke Arokkyam into pieces. She lamented loudly in such a great grief that made her accuse her god indignantly:

Saint Anthony has no eyes

Saint Anthony is dead, he is a corpse

..........................................................

Oh, I was short of a small length of rope!

I thought you would carry me to my grave

I hoped you would bury me and cover me with earth. (311)
After the formalities were over, Arokkyam brought Mary and her baby to her house. The very thought of Diraviyaraj distressed them a lot. Savuri tied the clothes in a big bundle, placed it over his bent back and walked with Arokkyam to thorappaadu. Mary expressed her willingness to join them. Arokkyam advised her to stay at home and to look after the baby with comfort. “Hereafter, I only want to look after you. You give me faith. You are my whole life, child” (314). But Mary did not want to remain at home like a corpse. So, she too joined them. Arokkyam took the baby on her hip and started walking. She tried to hide her distress and tears from Mary.

As they walked on, further and further, they looked like dark shadows. Then those shadows too diminished. They appeared as mere dots. Gradually the dots merged. A single dot. Even that diminished, disappeared. Like the bare sky, the horizon stretched, endless. Then just space. Empty space. (314)

Throughout the novel we notice Arokkyam accepting her fate as a washerwoman but perceiving that even that status had its privileges which she must enjoy. She had never resented the fact that she was a woman of a washer community, yet she was proud of the fact that she was an important part of others’ life, or so she thought. She failed to cope successfully with those changes around her in the immediate society as well as the world at large. She was totally confounded by the changes. She was adamant not to change but saw the change as the sign of decay.

She put up a bold face when she felt that she had not been given her dues, unlike Savuri who took the harshness rather timidly. All other people saw Arokkyam’s demands as greed, while she perceived them to be stingy. She felt her life crumbling down, and the changing customs of the place and people had heavily affected her life. Arokkyam’s problems were thus multifaceted. Yet, she took a strong decision not to
leave her hometown and to live in the midst of a society full of oppression and segregation in the name of caste.

Arokkyam never resented the fact that she was a woman of a washer community. She was proud of the fact that she was an important part of other’s life, or so she thought. Little did she understand the way the people perceived her and her family duties. With changing times, things got complicated further and finally never lightened up. Though the changes baffled Arokkyam, she failed to see the bigger picture emerging in modern times. Instead of conforming to newer ways, Arokkyam nurtured hatred towards the tailor and the laundry man, yet was firm not to leave the place, seeking better means for survival. Unlike her, her children decided to leave the village to other towns in search of jobs, like Bhikhu in The Road.

In Beasts of Burden the author portrays Arokkyam as the indomitable mother and the sole bread-winner of the family. Arokkyam’s care and love for her children and husband, her never failing help rendered to the women of her place, especially during the times of pregnancy, menstruation and delivery, are humane and astonishing. Her love for the place she lives in, which on no account she is ready to desert even during the most critical condition, is surprising. No doubt Arokkyam will ever live in the minds of all those readers who read this fine novel of Imayam. Thus, the very title has proved its significance of the story that as donkeys and mules carry the clothes of the villagers before and after washing, the people of the washing community carry on their shoulders the burden of their whole life, and the burden of the others too till their last breath.

Anand is a pioneer in his treatment of the problem of the socially downtrodden. His sense of social commitment has prompted him to write Untouchable and The Road. Though untouchability is officially abolished by the Government, Anand shows
in his novels that it still continues in many Indian villages. As suggested in *The Road*, many such socially deprived people have given up their traditional calling and went to other places, like Bhikhu, in search of other jobs. Yet, the discrimination still continues in many parts of India, for which a final solution is yet to be evolved.

Anand finds fault with religion as well as the high-born sects for the existence of the socially depressed classes. He believes that not only a change in the attitude of people but also a change in the external agencies are necessary for solving such urgent problem. For example, conversion to Christianity, adherence to Gandian ideal, adoption of machines and migration to cities are only external measures. Imayam, on the other hand, suggests a different solution. He explains, through Arokkyam in *Beasts of Burden*, that a low-born must be a self-conscious individual. Arokkyam never feels that she is an underprivileged and when others ill-treat her, she does not care for it. She never gives up her self-respect and dignity. Thus, according to Imayam, apart from external agencies, there should be a profound necessity for inner change, which should be an imperative on the part of the low-born. They should realise their own failings and try to reform themselves by shedding off such demerits for attaining intellectual and spiritual transformation.

Both Mulk Raj Anand and Imayam not only project the miserable conditions of the socially depressed people, but also bring to light their struggle to come away from their predicament in order to make a better living condition for them. Their struggle may not meet with immediate success, but in the days to come better fortunes may smile on their future generation, and their struggle is an important step towards that better future for people like them.

The next chapter is devoted to a study of the evils of class system.