CHAPTER III
THE EVILS OF CLASS SYSTEM

It has been said that the love of money is the root of all evil.
The want of money is so quite as truly.

- Samuel Butler

Class system is different from caste system in the sense that our society is divided into only two classes – the rich and the poor – while the caste system has “innumerable divisions and sub-divisions” (Paul 31). The demarcation into ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ has nothing to do with caste. If a Brahmin has no money, he belongs to the poor class and if a harijan is wealthy he belongs to the class of the rich, for money has become an indispensable criterion for human welfare and happiness and also to measure the status of an individual in society.

In Two Leaves and a Bud Buta is a barber by birth, but since he is a Sardar in position, he ranks higher in the labour force than is warranted by his caste origins. Similarly, Munoo of Coolie and Gangu of Two Leaves and a Bud are kshatriyas by birth, yet they belong to the wealthless class. Imayam’s characters in Arumugam, Jerry Albert, Supervisor of the Oroville Farm, and the manager of the same Farm, who not only exploit the workers under them but also seduce the girls who are at their mercy in the Farm, are also examples of high handedness of the haves and the helplessness of the have–nots. The impact of class consciousness is shown in some novels of Anand and Imayam as more damaging to social cohesion than that of caste.

The canker of class system often results in the segregations and subjugation of thousands of people into perpetual misery and eventual extinction. Class has
certainly proved more divisive than caste in Indian society because it is able to affect every section of the society at the economic, cultural and political levels. (31)

*Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* of Mulk Raj Anand and Imayam’s *Arumugam*, portray the wide gap between the haves and have-nots, the exploiters and the exploited. The problem of class is, of course, a universal phenomenon, but the interest of these two authors lies in exploring the stresses and sufferings generated in Indian Society by class divisions. The novels mentioned above centre round the predicament of the labouring class or the underprivileged. “They bring into sharp focus the capitalist domination which cuts across caste, cultural, intellectual and racial distinctions since money and power are the main factors involved here”(32).

Anand’s *Coolie* portrays the tribulations of an individual coolie in a class-ridden society while *Two Leaves and a Bud* is about coolies in general, picturing the problem of a group in a framework of a vast capitalist organization.

The economic set-up that existed in pre-independence India, which even today continues to some extent, allowed the concentration of wealth and power in a few hands - the capitalists, the zamindars and money lenders – who dictated harsh and humiliating terms to the poor. The poor labourers were forced to work under most degrading conditions. The English people in India during the British rule had the power and privilege to exploit the natives employed in their plantations and estates. As Anand portrays in *Two Leaves and a Bud*, that the coolies were economically at their mercy.

Though the Government of India has adopted several legislative measures that assure certain minimum wages and better service conditions to the workers and the coolies, their social and economic condition is, even today, far from satisfactory.
Anand and Imayam’s wish for the upliftment of the underprivileged, both socially and economically, finds expression in some of their novels, mostly in Anand’s *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* and Imayam’s *Arumugam*.

Anand’s preoccupation with the theme of exploitation derives from his experience in the rural life of the Punjab and elsewhere in India. He has seen the poor peasants naked but for the loin cloth, groaning under extreme poverty, insulted and exploited by the ‘Sahibs’ – the landlords, the money-lenders, the businessmen and even by the priests. Anand’s sympathy for such poor and oppressed people is so deep and sincere that in his *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* he almost cries with anguish against the injustice and cruelties inflicted upon them.

Anand’s *Coolie* is about a class-ridden society, which is more complicated and devious than the governed caste system. In this society or world of the coolies, the sufferers are subject to more rigidity and deprivation, unlike Bakha, the sweeper who is assured of a place in the society because of the indispensability of his work. The focal point in *Coolie* is always Munoo the coolie, who has no such assurance. He drifts from place to place, job to job and he is virtually rootless, incapable of finding a place for himself in society.

What is brought out is a disturbing picture of a harassed underdog, a helpless victim of oppressive forces and sport of a quixotic destiny. He [Munoo] symbolizes the disinherited and the dispossessed of the earth whose tragic life indicates man’s inhumanity to man. (43)

Anand portrays in *Coolie* the sufferings, torments and uncertainty of the underprivileged that have to accept subhuman existence. The protagonist of *Coolie* is modelled on one of Anand’s childhood playmates, who worked as a boyworker in a pickle factory. In *Coolie* the protagonist Munoo is a young boy of fourteen, studying
in the fifth class, who is forced to leave his Kangra village home, to become first a domestic servant and then a labourer, a coolie in various cities and finally back to the Hills of Simla where he dies of consumption.

Munoo remembers how his father had been exploited by the landlord who seized his five acres of land because the interest on the mortgage covering the unpaid rent has not been paid by Munoo’s father when the rains had been scanty and the harvests bad. So, his father died of bitterness and disappointment, “leaving his mother a penniless beggar, to support a young brother-in-law and a child in arms” (3).

Munoo also remembers the death of his mother, which has left him under the care of his bullying and cruel uncle, Daya Ram.

The sight of his mother grinding grain between the scarred surfaces of mill stones which she gyrated round and round, round and round, by the wooden handle, now with her right hand, now with her left, day and night had become indelibly imprinted on his mind. Also, the sight of her as she had lain dead on the ground with a horrible yet sad, set expression on her face, had sunk into his subconscious with all its weight of tragic dignity and utter resignation. (3)

Munoo’s life in the village is not happy because of the cruel treatment he receives from his uncle and aunt. His aunt wants him to stop going to school and begin earning money, and his uncle, Daya Ram, says that he is sufficiently grown up and must fend for himself. Daya Ram has found him a job in the house of the Babu of the bank where he works as a peon in Sham Nagar. So Munoo, as a child, is forced to leave his idyllic village to plains to take up a domestic job at the fastidious Bibiji’s house in Sham Nagar.

When his friend Jay Singh remarks that it must be nice to live in Shampur town, Munoo just smiles because in spite of the fact that his aunt is always abusing him,
orders him to do this or that, and beats him more than he beats the cattle, he really
does not want to leave the village and go to the town. He feels it always pleasant to sit
in his native hills with his little friends of the same age as himself, enjoying the ripe
fruits dropped by dozens in the spring and the cool breeze which soothes the fatigue
of the body and relieves the natural heat. “The blood of little Munoo ran to the tune of
all this lavish beauty. And he would rather have had all the machines come here than
tear himself away the sandy margins of the still back-waters where he played.” (4)

Munoo is taken by his uncle Daya Ram to the distant town and given proper
training by his uncle as how to greet his master Nathoo Ram, and his wife Bibiji,
when he sees them, as “I fall at your feet” or “I bow my forehead before you”. Anand
thus points out that poverty is a cruel evil which is the main cause for serfdom. Daya
Ram leaves Munoo in the house of the Babu after telling him that he would get plenty
to eat in the house and be given three rupees a month. Daya Ram’s exhortation inures
the young mind of Munoo to servility: “Don’t forget to do your best for the masters.
You are their servant...” (14). As Munoo listens to this, tears come rushing to his eyes
and through the tears he can see the high rocks and the silver line of the Beas, on the
banks of which his herds have been wandering for miles and miles.

On the first day itself Munoo is very much frightened by the abuses of Bibiji, the
Babu’s wife. In the new city he is not able to locate a suitable place to answer his
nature’s call in the morning, and being unable to control, he relieves at the wall
outside the house for which Bibiji scolds him severely. She calls him “eater of your
masters”, “shameless brute”, “pig” and “dog” and curses him to fade away and burn
himself.

Her voice rose from the first shock of unpleasantness, through the faint hiss of
anger to the mechanical volubility of her curses and mounted to a last not of
real despair. Munoo felt the blood rushing to his face. His brain seemed to be submerged in darkness. He wished he could disappear from the world somehow. For the first time in his life he felt ashamed to be seen relieving himself in the open. (17)

This “vulgar, stupid hillboy” is not permitted to use their toilet because it is an insult to their prestige. He is ordered by Bibiji to use the latrine meant for the servants at the foot of the hill. Munoo is prevented from playing with the children of her class and also to go anywhere in the house except the kitchen and the bath room. Bibiji has told him that he must not enter the sports of the Chota Babu, daughters Sheila and Lila. He should not ever touch their utensils without washing his hands because his clothes are filthy and his body is dirty. Munoo unconsciously compares his carefree life at the hills with the severity of life in the town.

Munoo complains to Daya Ram about Bibiji’s continual nagging and also about the hard and bitter life he is undergoing there. But Daya Ram does not bother the least about Munoo’s inner sentiments, and reminds him about his position in society. On another occasion when Munoo complains that he is unable to endure the unpleasant humiliations from Bibiji, Daya Ram strikes him with blow after pushing him against the wall. The poor boy’s pitiful cries fail to soften the hard heart of Daya Ram, who has been “hardened into cruelty by his love of money, by the fear of poverty and by the sense of inferiority that his job as a peon in the bank gave him’ (48).

Munoo is interested in taking part in the games of Babu’s children, who are free from social vanity and disparity. The children enjoy his hilarious monkey dance, but Bibiji orders him not to participate in the sports of her children because he has no rights to join the laughter of his superiors. But Munoo, in the absence of his mistress, exhibits monkey dance to amuse the children. In his childish curiosity, eagerness and
involvement, he bites Sheila on the cheek. When Sheila pulls hard at his ear while he is dancing, he turns round and springs upon her, “snarling and grasing his teeth as if he were a real monkey” (57). This unfortunate incident results in a violent disturbance in his unsettled life. He gets a volley of abuses and blows. Bibiji considers this trivial incident as an insult to the honour of their family and curses him without limit.

May you die! May the vessel of your life never float with sea of existence!... May you never rest in peace, neither you nor your antecedents!

That you should attack the honour of my child!... You lustful young bull from the hills! How did we know we were taking on a rogue and a scoundrel! (59)

Babu Nathoo Ram slaps and kicks Munoo ruthlessly with his black boots. Without caring for the cries of Munoo and words of apology – “Forgive me Babuji, forgive me!” – the Babu kicks the boy again ferociously and makes towards the corner where a thick stick lies with which he strikes him blow after blow. Munoo writhes with pain and groans, while his soul surges up “in rebellion and hate, a hate of which he had not thought himself capable. He was startled. But he dared not revolt” (63).

Munoo who flees from the constant abuses and frenzied rage of the frightening and frowning missus of the Babu, is lucky enough to meet Seth Prabha Dayal, who left his Kangra home early and lived in the city of Daulatpur. Prabha has worked his way up from a coolie to the proprietorship of a pickle-making and essence-brewing factory in partnership with Ganapat, who is, of course, inhuman like the Sham Nagar Babu. Ganapat tells Prabha that they do not know who Munoo is, “But of course we need another boy at the works to help Tulsi, Maharaj and Bonga, to run errands and do odd jobs. And, it seems, he will be glad enough to have the food, and we need not pay him” (63).
Prabha, ignoring his partner’s words, asks Munoo whether he would work with them, to which Munoo moves his head up and down to signify assent. For, he has not thought about what he is going to do since he has run away from the fierce and bullying Babus in Sham Nagar. Prabha Dayal accepts Munoo as “a very auspicious find” (62) and finds similarities between himself and the boy, which leads to his paternal feelings for him. His wife, Parbati, soon grows fond of Munoo and gives him motherly love, affection and warmth. Both husband and wife recognize a kind of kinship with him, some kind of affinity they would feel for their unborn son. But as fate would have it, life for Munoo in the factory proves a miserable as it was in Sham Nagar.

Munoo is startled to see the primitive conditions of the factory.

It seemed so awkward and dangerous to descent into the strange, dark, airless outhouse of the factory, which sank like a pit into the bowls of the earth, among the tall surrounding houses in the heart of the town. (67)

Anand portrays the exploitation of the workers by the native employers in the factories of Daulatpur. The pickle factory of Prabha and Ganapat looks like an inferno. The old women workers, engaged in peeling apples, have to do their job in the caverns of the factory. The coolies are huddled against each other when they are sleeping. The factory itself is an outhouse converted into a factory which has no chimney even. The smoke from the factory is a health hazard to the workers as well as to the neighbours, and what is more pitiable is that the health authorities are indifferent to such unhygienic conditions. Munoo, who would have run away from the gloom of the factory but for the kindness and affection shown by Prabha Dayal and his wife Parbati, soon gets used to the conditions in the factory.
If the town of Sham Nagar, at the foot of the hills, had far exceeded in complexity anything conceived by the imagination of Munoo the hill boy from Bilaspur, the feudal city of Daulatpur was an even more staggering confusion of things. In the face if it had only one feeling, that of holding himself together and in close connection with Prabha, so that he might not get lost. (70)

Inside the factory, absence of sufficient air and the hotness of the sunlight coming down from the corrugated iron sheets aggravate the condition by adding excessive heat to the smoke exuded from the huge steaming cauldrons and ovens. The coolies working in the factory look like animals. The pungent smoke chokes and smothers the coolies, irritating their throats and spoiling their ear drums. Thus, Anand shows how in the moneyed society, rich people’s success in their business is counted only by means of the profit they earn and not by the means adopted by them to earn such profit. They earn money by exploiting the coolies who are forced to work in the factories where sanitation and life-security are given least importance.

Ganapat bullies the workers in the factory. The coolies have to carry flasks of essence from the factory to the various retail shops on their heads, which is, of course, not cumbersome to Munoo. For Munoo

To carry heavy copper flasks of essence from the factory to various retail shops on his head was a pleasant exercise, since it meant an escape from the gloom of the factory into the worlds of fine-clothed men and women, and of wonder shops. (91)

Towards the spring come big and unripe mangoes, which Lachi and the old spinsters have to peel for pickling and jam-making. Munoo’s ravenous hunger for the mangoes causes him to steal and eat some unripe mangoes, which made his teeth ache and eyes sore. Munoo’s cries bring Prabha down from the house. Prabha chides him
saying that he should have buried the unripe mangoes in straw for a few days and
eaten them when they ripe. Ganapat, who comes to know of this, finds fault with his
partner Prabha for having made a thief of Munoo and spoiled him. “You spoil him,
Prabha! You have no idea of running a business!” fumed Ganapt. ‘These swine don’t
do any work, but laze around eating raw fruit all day. They won’t work unless goad
them with the rod” (94).

Prabha once, in the absence of Ganapat, arranges for a loan of five hundred rupees
for interest from Sir Todar Mal during the days of financial hardship. Prabha gives
Munoo a jar of fresh jam to be handed over to Lady Todarmal as a bribe to cover the
gap of delay in the repayment of the loan. But Ganapat sees Munoo handing over the
jam and he grows wild with anger. He strikes Munoo on the right cheek, while the
boy raises his left arm to protect his face.

Ganapat’s second slap fell on the hard, conic bone at the corner of the joint. His
hand was hurt. He was infuriated beyond control. He struck the boy in the ribs
with his fist, one, two, three blows, till Munoo fell stumbling on to the mud in
the passage sobbing and shrieking hoarsely. (97)

Lady Todarmal, witnessing this cruelty, stands aghast and tells Ganapat that they
gave him money when he needed it, and they even let him have a part of their house
for his women servants to work in. Now he grudges for a jar of jam. She and her
husband have been kind to him, in spite of the fact that the smoke from his factory is a
great nuisance to them. She also tells Ganapat that his partner is not a gentleman, but
he is a rogue and an upstart. His father turned his wife out and lived with
Muhammadan prostitute; moreover, his father robbed other people of their money
with false promises to do business for them, and now Ganapat is robbing his partner.
She continues saying that Ganapat is a drunkard and a womanizer, who is not a fit
person to be in a respectable neighbourhood where there are young daughters and newly-wed women.

Planning to cheat his partner, Ganapat swindles the money collected from the retail dealers, and starts a new factory with it. Prabha’s repeated requests not to leave him fall into deaf ears. Ganapat not only sends Prabha to the street but also scolds him saying that he does not belong to Ganapat’s class, and he belongs to the street where he should go. Further, He spreads the fabricated news that Prabha has become bankrupt which collects the creditors together, who urge Prabha to repay the loan. They take him to the police station where he is beaten severely by the policemen. Through this incident Anand shows the victory of villainy over humanity in this corrupt world of frauds and cheats. Poor, innocent Prabha is arrested without a warrant and beaten up for a crime he has not committed. Prabha’s words to the sergeant that he has no money buried anywhere as the sergeant accuses, and he would pay up every paise that he owes to his creditors have no effect on the sergeant who gives him blow after blow.

Munoo and Tulsi undertake some odd jobs to look after Prabha’s family after his release. Prabha, who has now fallen sick due to both physical and mental strains, and his wife Parbati decides to leave Daulalpur and go back to the hills from where they have come, leaving Munoo as a waif.

The neighbouring men and women had gathered in the courtyard to say farewell to the once most successful and now the most broken of all hill coolies. ‘Ram, Ram, brother Prabha Dayal’, they consoled in sad, sombre tones, ‘Ram Ram, It will be all right. You will come back again. You come back after you have regained your health? (129)
The departure of Prabha Dayal and his wife from Daulatpur to their native village leaves our protagonist Munoo once again on the streets, completely desolate and heart-broken. Munoo’s odyssey is not, of course, in search of identity with the world outside him, but for a mere living. As Iyengar says, “People like him [Munoo] are as straws in the wind, and they can realize themselves only through the force of external necessity in the varied succession of irrelevant and unconnected circumstances” (342).

Munoo starts his journey from Daulatpur with the help of an elephant driver to his dream city, Bombay. Soon after his arrival his belief about the city is shattered when he sees at the edge of a foot path a coolie lying huddled, pillowing his head on his arm and shrinking into himself as if he were afraid to occupy too much space. He has gone to Bombay with high hopes.

He did not want to remember either Sham Nagar or Daulatpur. Both had treated him badly. He was going away to a new world, to the new, the wonderful world of a big city, where there were ships and motors, big buildings, marvelous gardens, and he fancied, rich people who just threw money about to the coolies in the street. (Coolie 145)

But the incident in a grandiose hotel in Bombay, where Munoo is asked to sit down on the floor to drink a bottle of soda water shatters his hope. When a clean-clothed rich man in the hotel looked at him as if he were a leper, Munoo grows wild with rage, but tries to still his mind by acknowledging the superiority of rich people, whom he has always been told to respect. Though he wants to sip the soda slowly and enjoy the full flavor of the drink, he gulps it down as fast as he can, to leave the place urgently to avoid the men in the place who are staring at him. This consciousness of his low position makes him nervous and he feels extremely guilty for having been
introduced into the world of the rich. This is Munoo’s first experience of the tragic exploitation in the city life.

Munoo is fortunate to find Harihar, a coolie, who had worked at the Girjabite Cotton Factory some six months ago. Harihar has come back to Bombay with his wife and children to find employment. Munoo, Hari and his wife get employment at Sir George White Cotton Mills for a very low wage. It is a common practice in the factory that every worker has to give their superior officers a part of their wages and other gifts to retain their jobs. Every month the workmen give commission to the foreman for the security of their jobs. The foreman runs money-lending business by which he has become a landlord, owning many huts to be rented out to the coolies. He charges excessive rent for the huts and collects exorbitant rate of interest for the money he lends.

Anand pictures vividly the pitiable condition of the coolies in the city. The coolies sleeping on pavements and shop boards is a familiar sight in cities like Bombay. They have to find some place in the streets where shops close early and the empty boards to sleep on. Anand gives such a picture in the following passage.

The bodies of numberless coolies lay strewn in tattered garbs. Some were curled up into knots, others lay face downwards on folded arms. Others were flat on their chests, pillowing their heads on their bundles or boxes, others crouched into corners talking, others still huddled together at the doorsteps of closed shops, or lay on the boards in a sleep which looked like death, but that it was broken by deep sighs. (162)

Munoo compares the coolies of Bombay with those at Daulatpur and comes to the conclusion that there is really little difference between them.
The exploitation of the workers in the hands of Jimmie Thomas, foreman of Sir George White Cotton Mills, who represents the British mill owners, is described in the Bombay section of the novel. Munoo, Hari, his wife Lakshmi and their two children are appointed there for just sixty rupees a month altogether. The foreman is unkind towards Hari. As they agree to work, the foreman advances them ten rupees at an interest of four annas per rupee per month, which shows his greed and love of money.

Since there are no fair price shops and credit societies attached to the mills or nearby, the workers are always at the mercy of money lenders and shopkeepers who charge interest on goods bought on credit, and the rate of interest is usually an anna for a rupee. Very often workers like Hari buy goods beyond their paying capacity, which leads them to permanent debts. A worker called Shambu is forced to sell his two cocks for a meagre price of twelve annas. The workers including their wives and children work for twelve hours a day with a very short lunch period. As Anand says, there is no place for them to go to take their lunch, no canteen, no shop, and not even a confectioner’s shop. Very often the workers meet with accidents but no medical aid is provided for such victims. They have to be taken to the hospitals in the town, and during their absence they lose their wages, and sometimes their jobs even.

The absence of a crèche forces the women workers to work in the spinning shed with their babies tied to their backs, or wallowing in the dust on the floor, often crying, screaming and sobbing. Besides these, the workers are bullied and beaten by the foreman. As Mr. Williams says, the scene with the suffering workers and the brutal money lenders, who make the best opportunity of the poverty of the labourers, reminds one of Dickens’ Hard Times.
Ratan, Munoo’s friend, repeatedly says that the only escape from all such kinds of exploitation is the formation of an active trade union, which he believes, will protect the interest of the workers. But the workers are totally denied trade union rights, and because of Ratan’s close association with the trade union, he is sacked and discharged from the textile mill.

The trade union leaders, Sanda, Muzaffar and Stanley Jackson, persuade the workers to refuse to work in the mill until the hours of work are shortened, they are given houses to live in, their children are provided with the opportunity of going to schools and Ratan is reinstated. The Board of the Directors, who want to teach a lesson to the workers, declare that there will be no work for the fourth week every month till further notice, and no wages will be paid for that week. This decision of the Board forces the mill workers to declare a general strike.

When Sanda is addressing the agitating workers, the British hired hooligans spread the allegation that a Hindu girl has been kidnapped by the Muslims. This turns the meeting into a communal strife. Both religious groups indulge in assaulting each other. As Munoo runs away from the troubled scene, he is knocked down by Mrs.Mainwaring car. And Mrs.Mainwaring takes him to Simla to make him a servant.

The final phase of Munoo’s exploitation at Simla is reminiscent of the beautiful Kangra hills of his birth place. Mrs.Mainwaring employs Munoo as her rickshaw-puller without knowing that years of exploitation and poverty have already made him suffer from tuberculosis, a fact which Munoo himself is unaware of. Yet, the final stage of Munoo at Simla seems to be a reward for his endurance and suffering and his belief that life has always something meaningful to offer. In fact, he derives pleasure in sweeping, running errands and driving the rickshaw when his mistress goes out for shopping or for an evening drive, He receives care and attention from his mistress,
and is gladly in touch with the glamorous world of the Europeans, for which he has longed very earnestly.

Such a life for Munoo is not permitted for long. He is isolated for his affliction with consumption, and after repeated haemorrhage in the early hours of one ill-fated night, he passes away. It is the social system that is responsible for the tragedy of Munoo. His death, “the premature life negation” (Harrex 91) completes his victimhood. “His aspirations, passionate longings and potentialities go waste before they could find fulfilment” (Paul 53).

“The travail of the coolies pictured in Two leaves and a Bud is not less acute than that described in Coolie” (33). It pictures a grimmer tragedy, in which the world of Assam plantations is too dense a jungle for the ray of life to penetrate. In Two Leaves and a Bud Anand spins the story around the family of a helpless peasant, Gangu, who is lured off to the hills by the false promises of a clever coolie-catcher, called Buta, which makes him experience endless humiliations and die at the hands of his unscrupulous boss.

Many of his fellow passengers are blissfully ignorant of their impending doom. Gangu, who is no longer an “unthinking little thing”, is sceptical about the truth of the golden promise because of the insistent overtone of exaggeration in Buta’s speech. But Buta uses the peasant’s strong love of land as a decoy and Gangu follows “the glib-tongued scoundrel”, without knowing that “the promised paradise of plenty with its thick vegetation and idyllic greenery is only a mirage”(34).

The novel opens with the cliché “Life is like a journey… A journey into the unknown” (Two Leaves and a Bud 1). This opening has dramatic significance because it is indeed an unconscious journey to eternal doom.
It derives its title from the practice that when tea is harvested, it is the bud at the tip of the plant along with the two leaves beneath it that are plucked. The subject matter of the novel is the exploitation of the labourers in tea estates. When the novel opens, we find Gangu, a poor peasant from Punjab, on a train. He is going to become a coolie in the Macpherson Tea Estate.

Gangu’s brother had mortgaged their family land to a money lender. Since he was unable to pay back the loan, the land was confiscated when Gangu was past middle age and was not able to get any other job except to cultivate someone else’s land as a tenant. Buta Ram painted a rosy picture of the life in the tea gardens and told him that he could make lakhs of rupees. Buta Ram also gave him the train fare for the whole family. Poor Gangu was easily taken in and left with his wife and two children for Assam.

Anand presents a world in which the British planters and their officials are ranged against the bonded coolies, who live in “tin boxes” of houses. To this world of the exploiters Gangu, his wife Sajani and their children Leila and Buddhu are lured by Buta with tempting promises of free land for cultivation, interest-free loan, nice house to live in and decent salary. But once they reach the “promised paradise of plenty”, it turns out to be an inferno of tortures and exploitations.

The coolie lines are on the edge of a steam of contaminated water, from which cholera spread regularly. The poor coolies can be saved from cholera by supplying them pure drinking water, which may cost just one or two lakhs of rupees, which is a very meagre part of the profit the planters make every year. The humanitarian doctor, John de la Havre, submits several proposals for the improvement of the coolies, but the management refuses all of them, as “There coolies are sub-human, and do not altogether value the benefits of hygiene” (27).
Gangu is allotted a hut made of brick walls and corrugated tin roof, which is like a furnace with the heat radiating from the tin roof. This is no better than a prison room. Narain, one of the coolies, points out: “This prison has no bars, but it is nevertheless an unbreakable jail. The chowkidars keep guard over the plantation, and they bring you back if you should run. The chowkidars go round at night with a lamp and often every door to see if we are all at home” (36).

Gangu and other coolies of the McPherson Tea Estate are victims of the British capitalists represented by Charles Croft Cooke, the planter, and Reggie Hunt, the assistant planter. The coolies are not paid the wages that are promised to them, and the wages do not even work out to eight annas a day for the whole family – three annas for Gangu, two annas each for his wife and daughter and three paisa for his child.

The way the coolies are exploited by the middlemen, who are called sardars, is fully brought out in the following passage:

The sardars are favoured people. What they say goes. Look, I [Narain] have been here so many years. I have not been back to Bikaner once since I came. The sardars have lands to cultivate, but I have none. The manager pays the sardar, the sardar pays me what he likes. I want some land. But can I get it forcibly? The manager gives it to the sardars, and we cannot get it from them.

The sardars, the babu. The chaprasi, the warders, have all got land. (159)

The businessmen also join hands with the British planters in the exploitation of the poor farmers. Most often the entire shops in a particular market are owned by the agents of the same owner, and the farmers are thus denied of their bargaining power. The coolies live in dread of their masters, both the white men and their own countrymen.
The Englishmen could not have exploited the coolies so thoroughly unless the Indian supervisors and agents helped them in the suppression. Agents like Buta Ram get the land earmarked for the private cultivation of the labourers. The warders beat and extract work from the workers. The clerks and even peons in the office exploit them by taking bribes. Gangu approaches the manager for a loan, but before he could see the money, the clerk and the peon bargain for their share. The money-lender charges exorbitant interest and attaches the salary of the coolies before it can be paid to them.

The unhygienic condition of the estate leads to the outbreak of malaria that kills Sajini, Gangu’s wife. Having no money for the funeral expenses, Gangu approaches the planter, Croft-Cookie, for an advance payment. But instead of money, he receives only abuse: “Get out! Get out!... You bloody fool, get out! Get out! You have been spreading infection all over the place! Don’t you know that you were under segregation? By whose orders did you come here” (107).

Gangu borrows twenty rupees from the Bania for the funeral expenses. As he fails to repay the amount, the Bania gets an unofficial order of attachment from his wages, a part of which has already been cut as a punishment for rioting against the planters, thus leaving nothing behind for his subsistence. The good hearted Dr. Havre, who is Anand’s mouthpiece, says that it is very unfortunate that the white masters do not realize the deplorable plight of the millions of coolies in the British Empire in India. He further says,

The black coolies clear the forests, plant the fields, toil and garner the harvest, while all the money-grabbing, slave-driving, soulless managers and directors draw their salaries and dividends and build up monopolis. Therein lies the necessity of revolution in this country: on the one hand the vast masses,
prisoners and so many chains, bearing the physical signs of grief, of lassitude, even of death, and on the other hand, the supercilious rich, wrapped up in their self – assurance and complacency, never once questioning the ideals of glory, power and wealth… (115)

Anand analyses the working conditions of the coolies of the plantations in India thus:

Wages of coolies on the Indian plantations have not changed for the last seventy years. The wages of a coolie in 1870 were five rupees per month. In 1922, the maximum wages of a coolie on the Assam tea plantations did not exceed even rupees per month… It should be remarked in this connection that the price of rice - the coolies’ only article of food – has more than doubled during this period. The coolie spends practically the last of his monthly wages on his rice. The clothes or rather rags, worn by the Indian coolie, occupy but an insignificant position in his budget. (117)

This shows the poverty, suffering and exploitation of the coolies working in the estates. The collies suffer not only such a low level of wages but also from indebtedness to his employees in outlandish districts, where they have to depend upon the shops provided by the employees for his foodstuffs, and other provisions. The indebtedness, together with the isolation of the plantation, renders its difficult for them to seek employment elsewhere and this condition practically reduces them to a life of economic slavery. It was the nature of the Britishers in India to keep the Indians poor, reduce them in their own estimation, and then say that the natives are dirty and obsequious.
Gangu observes:

…..self respect and his sense of dignity had been hurt by the kicks he had received from the manager Sahib… the Rajput in him… had been prevented from doing so [kicking the manager back] by the calamity of his wife’s death… he knew how the insult latent in the beating hurt a man more than the actual pain of the blow. And there was something more cruel in the impact of a kick than in all the abuses that was hurled at him. Not that the kicks had bruised his body, stiff and muscular from a lifetime of toil, but it was the humiliation of having always to lower his eyes before the man who had beaten him. (159)

Anand also shows in *Two Leaves and a Bud* how the honour of good looking wives and daughters of the coolies is constantly at stake. Reggie Hunt, the assistant planter, who is an effective counterbalance to the humanitarian Doctor Havre, is an embodiment of all evil. In his love for outdoor life, he has come out to India for the lure of the land. He visits warder Neogi’s wife for satisfying his animal passion. Neogi has no other choice than to accept this humiliating exploitation. If he protests, “He would have lost his job and been lashed as Ranbir, the coolie from Ranchi, was lashed, because he refused to give his wife to the Ashastant planter. The Sahib had Ranbir imprisoned, and took his wife” (16).

Anand does not blame such women because they are forced to do what they do. Women like Neogi’s wife or Leila are portrayed as victims who have no power to protest. If the workers gather to voice their grievances, the warders are immediately ordered to strike them. They are thus under constant check and terror from which there is no escape.

One of the women coolies, Chambeli, taunts Neogi’s wife about Reggie, and a wordy quarrel occurs between the two, which leads later to blows. Coolies from the neighbouring gardens rush to the spot, and the warder Neogi beats them with his
bamboo. Soon there are shouts and screams from all the gardens. The crowd becomes uncontrollable, and Reggie, appearing on the scene on his horse, trampling the crowd, some of whom are begging or crying or cursing. He rides his horse into crowd. Men, women and children run in panic and frantic dismay.

Many coolies are wounded, and one dies. This rouses the mob, who naturally seek the help and advice of the kind hearted and loving Doctor Havre, who, on seeing the wounded and dying coolies, asks them to go to the manager and tell him that they will not work until justice is done. The coolies go together to protest, but Croft-Cooke and Reggie meet them on the way and order the warders to drive them away. The coolies are beaten up.

The attempted riot brought down heavy penalties on the coolies’ heads. Gangu, Narain and two others are identified as the ring leaders and are fined fifty rupees each which would be deducted from wages. The British Governor of Assam pardons the coolies who took part in the aborted revolt, and also halves their fine.

Gangu comes to the plantations to start a new life, but the irony is that he goes out losing his own life. He regards his daughter Leila as a gift, a blessing, but he is destined to meet his death because of her. The evening Reggie sees Leila plucking tea, and calls her. Reggie asks to come to his house, but Leila runs away screaming in fear. Reggie goes straight to the coolies’ quarters and taps at the door, calling Leila to come out. Buddhu, Leila’s eight-year old brother, comes out. Reggie tempts him with a rupee to call his sister out. But Buddhu runs away screaming. Soon there are shouts of “Thief! Thief!” Reggie, fearing for his safety, fires at the dark sky with his revolver. He wants to run away, but finds himself face to face with Gangu. Mad with both anger and lust, he shoots down Gangu. Reggie is tried for the murder of Gangu. The justice, Mowberley, who is an Englishman, finds Reggie “not guilty” of the
charge of murder, and Reggie is released. The novel is, thus, a scathing condemnation of the white man’s atrocities on the poor Indian plantation workers.

What is significant is that whatever humiliation Gangu and the other coolies suffer, they are inclined to forgive their exploiters. For Gangu, “…had been weakened by life into an accepting character. For working under a torrid sun, sowing, reaping, attending to a hundred different jobs fighting nature, had taught him patience and endurance” (161).

Anand also points out in the novel that the labourers are also equally responsible for the ill-treatment and exploitation. What Engineer Tweetie says is not far from truth.

…..they are taking to deceiving you by putting moss-covered logs of wood at the bottom of their baskets, instead of bricks. And one of them had put her baby into it. Almost choked him with leaves. When I found out and asked her why she did it, she said she had nowhere to put him while plucking… (53)

It is to cheat them, to defraud the weight of their pluck that they do so. The picture of estate life that Anand gives is substantiated by the report on the working conditions of plantation labourers in Assam Valley. It was Anand who first uses the novel to describe the lives of the poor and the exploited. There is always in his novels a social conflict between two classes - the rich and the poor, the exploiters and the exploited.

The exploitation of simple village farmers is realistically presented in The Village also. The seventy-year old Nihal Singh, a rustic of Nandpur, is exploited by the landlord Harbans Singh and the village money-lender Seth Chaman Lal. In this novel economic backwardness is projected as the main reason for the tragedy of many farmers like Nihal Singh, who represents the case of farmers as a whole. The evils of
the Jamindari system compel Nihal Singh to pay, in addition to the rent due from him, gifts on various occasions to the landlord.

Harbans Singh’s family wins a fraudulent case, which causes Nihal Singh to lose ten acres of land, and another five acres on the production of a false deed, supposed to have been signed by Nihal Singh’s father. He is left with only five acres of land, and that too is in a lawsuit. He seeks the favour of the money-lender, Lalla Chaman Lal to meet the various commitments for the law-suit and the marriages in the family. The money-lender, grown rich and powerful, dictates hard terms to the borrowers.

The exploitation of the village people at the hands of the village Mahant Nandagir is also clearly pictured in the novel. Mahant Nandagir exploits people by making them believe that life has no end and the village people will find a just reward for the service by reader to the saints, like him, and nothing else counts. But Mahant Nandagir smokes and drinks hemp and leads a life of lechery; yet he is considered a ‘Guru’ and is held in great reverence. Nihal Singh, though in heavy debts, has to make yearly gifts to this Mahant, who takes advantage of the ignorance and illiteracy of the villagers. The exploiters of the village – landlords, money-lenders and priests - help each other to safeguard his interests. Srinivasa Iyengar says,

The typical ingredients of village life - landlord Sarkar, Sarkar, Sarkar and mumbo-jumbo convention and superstition, mass conformity and mass hysteria, the cupidity and cruelty of some and the apathy and helplessness of the many - inevitably conspire to daunt and all but crush the free and ardent spirit of Lalu Singh. At every turn he is seized with discomfiture, and the agony and the anger seem to be in vain. (Iyengar 347)
Like the tea planters in *Two Leaves and a Bud* the capitalists in *The Village* dictate humiliating and unacceptable terms to the starving ‘thathiars’. Anand’s opposition to the private ownership of the means of production is shown in *The Village*.

In one of his letters to Saros Cowasjee, Anand speaks about his stand on the introduction of machines, which replace human labourers. “I wanted to show that, though we can’t reject the machine altogether, we have to control it, as a driver controls a railway engine” (*Author to Critic: The Letters of Mulk Raj Anand* 123). The result of the factory set up by M/s. Gokul Das Murali results in the throwing out of the traditional coppersmiths. Anand is not against the introduction of machines, for he believes in the use of the machines in the modern age. But he wants to control the machines from private ownership by nationalizing the industries.

One of the agitating workers, Ralia, possessed by a sudden frenzy, starts damaging the machines in the factory. His friend, Ananta, would not allow his friend to do so, and in the scuffle Ralia batters Ananta’s head against a machine, which leads to his death. Anand says in one of his letters that the actual drama of *The Village* is staged “as a battlefield of hell and heaven, devil and god, the rough diamond against the polished dandy of Indo-Anglian literature” (123).

Anand’s deep concern for a grave social problem, namely the exploitation of the poor and the under-privileged in *Two Leaves and a Bud, Coolie* and *The Village* is unmistakable. Anand has been one with the suffering masses and has a clear awareness of the pain, which they are subject to. He suggests some ways and means for their liberation from the exploiters. They should organize themselves and revolt against their oppressors. They should not resign themselves to fate and they should not be defeatists too, however worst their conditions may be. Along with the nature of
fighting for their rights, they should also possess endurance and readiness for certain sacrifice.

Like Mulk Raj Anand, Imayam too hails the common people and the common experiences of common men, and while doing so, his heart, like that of Anand, is distressed witnessing the pain of the poor and the downtrodden. Both Anand and Imayam take cudgels against this cruel society which harbours both the privileged rich and the underprivileged poor. Both write about the suppressed humanity with a firm conviction. They both wish the common man to raise himself to tremendous heights of dignity and redeem the world from its misery and pain.

The evil of class system is most forcibly expressed in *Arumugam*, Imayam’s second novel. The novel mainly deals with the story of Arumugam and his mother Dhanabhagyam as well as Dhanabhagyam’s father Muthu *Kizhavar* [old man] and her husband Raman. Their lives have never been smooth. From the beginning till the end of the novel their hopes are shattered to pieces by the indomitable power of fate. This novel is a realistic portrayal of the life of the downtrodden and the underprivileged. Along with the story, Imayam gives a wonderful delineation of the four major characters, mentioned above.

Dhanabhagyam and her son Arumugam were living with Muthu *Kizhavar* in Poothurai village, when the story started. The story of the past - that is her marriage with Raman, life with him at Krishnapuram, the birth of Arumugam and the unexpected death of Raman after which she came back to Poothurai village to live again with her father – all these are revealed by the author beautifully by using flashback technique. Since the author uses past tense while narrating the story, the same tense is used in the thesis.
In fact, Imayam begins the story in the book after the gap of eight years after the marriage of Dhanabhagyam and Raman, when she was the mother of a son. Eight days after Dhanabhagyam’s birth, a fated fever carried away her mother Sivagnanam, Kizhavar’s wife. After that Kizhavar sold his wife’s thali and bought a cow for Dhanabhagyam. Kizhvar’s love for his daughter, especially after Sivagnanam’s death, is revealed in these words: “He could not bear his daughter to be out of his sight for a minute. He took her with him wherever he went, and brought her up without knowledge of hunger. Her every whim was satisfied; everything took place according to her wishes” (Arumugam 21).

The old man and Raman met for the first time at Koottherippattu fair, where Muthu Kizhavar used to go to sell his baskets woven out of nocchi twigs [twigs of the five-leaved chaste tree], which was his trade. Raman had come there to sell his goats. He went to Kizhavar in the fair to buy two baskets, after selling his goats. In no time the two had taken a liking for each other. Raman met Kizhavar a month later, when the former visited Poothurai to condole a death. It was at this time that Raman caught sight of Dhanabhagyam and immediately started loving her. He told Kizhavar that he was an orphan and wanted a girl to look after him. Kizhavar also thought on the same line and agreed to give Dhanabhagyam in marriage to him. Kizhavar turned a deaf ear to Dhanabhagyam’s protest and in spite of her anger and unwillingness their wedding ceremony was performed on a Friday in the Mailam Murugan temple. Dhanabhagyam was sent with Raman after a week’s stay in Poothurai to Krishnapuram. Before leaving she called his father “Chandala – traitor!” “She swore that she would leave her husband and return home; she would hang herself” (09). This is a dramatic irony because Dhanabhagyam did leave her husband and did return home. And at the end of the novel she hanged herself.
Kizhavar accompanied the couple up to tank–bund to see them off. Before they left, he told Raman that he should be more kind to her and never raise a hand against her:

I’ve nurtured her like a plant for fifteen years. She’s an innocent young girl – a potapillay [female]. She mustn’t be unhappy. She never knew her mother, never knew what it was to suckle at her mother’s breasts. She might be willful now, but once she’s tasted the pleasure of the loins, everything will turn out well. Krishnapurathare, never raise a hand against her, no matter what. (12)

Raman promised the old man that he might trust him and would do what the old man pleaded. Raman did stick on to his words to Kizhavar. For Dhanabhagyam used to call him bad names, like ‘bullheaded brute, Murderer, Paavi, and Chandal.’ She would even fume at him saying “cholera plague, you” (13).

Raman cooked for them both for a week in Krishnapuram, during which period Dhanabhagyam would creep in everyday after Raman had left for Oroville Farm, take her food and immediately go away to spend the day on the thinnais [an elevated open varandah in the outside of the house] of the neighbours. Days and nights were thus spent by Dhanabhagyam in the homes of the neighbours. The villagers made fun of her, and she could not lump their taunts anymore. She, therefore, began to cook for Raman next week, but she did it unwillingly, going away from the house before Raman’s arrival and taking refuge at the neighbours’ houses. This continued for the third week also.

When she was cooking in the third week as usual, Raman left for work, but unexpectedly he came back in, and Dhanabhagyam tried to run out of the house. But Raman caught hold of her and when she tried to free herself, he tightened his grip, laughing. This made her lose the temper, and boiling with rage, she pushed and
kicked him, calling him Paavi and Chandala. “Ayyayyo, my god, did that old man send me to you for this? May he fall and break his bones – crush himself to death. Build a paadai (bier) for him – drag him away to the burial ground in it! Yei Maariyaayi, warrior goddess, punish him for his sins – Ayyoo…” (13) Raman had his wish fulfilled in spite of her crying and protest.

Raman had never spoken a word against Dhanabhagyam. His good-natured response to all her taunts made Dhanabhagyam more and more unresisting day by day. But she missed no chance of yelling and shrilling abuses at him; sometimes she even slapped him, rained blows on him and pinched his thighs hard. But to all her “pinches and punches” (13), good-humoured chuckles were Raman’s only response. Raman would go out to work every day and return home in the evenings with a smile on his face. He would always forgive his wife for all her faults and allowed her wishes to reign supreme.

Raman had been very patient and enduring towards his wife, which gesture made her see the good nature of him. The result was the birth of Arumugam. Raman had never laid a finger on Arumugam as well as his wife. He had never tortured them. It was Raman who generally carried Arumugam on his shoulders whenever they went out and bought whatever the boy wished for. Though Dhanabhagyam had been fuming at her husband always, if Raman did not return from work at his usual time, she would ask Arumugam to run up to the end of the street and see whether his father was arriving. She would send the boy to look for him again and again.

Raman had chosen the name Arumugam for his son because it had been his grandfather’s name. Dhanabhagyam had not liked the name at all, and suggested a hundred other names, none of which had moved Raman in the least. When she complained about the name to Kizhavar, he replied, “Arumugam? Excellent. The
name of Lord Arumugha, the god with six faces. The name of Mailam Murugan. A first class name. No other name will do. (79)

One day, Raman left for Oroville as usual. At about four in the afternoon a few white people came to his house, stepped down from the jeep and lowered and placed Raman’s body on the thinnai. Dhanabhagyam, who was cooking then, heard the noise and came out. Peeping out from the door and seeing what was happening outside, she fainted. It was reported that Raman had died, slipping down from the top of the meditation hall.

Dhanabhagyam broke down completely, sprawled on the ground before the body and sobbed as though her heart would break. Her cry reverberated through the whole village. “Why couldn’t have death struck me, she lamented. What can a poor woman do, other than bear children, at the most? Even tender chillies burn hot, don’t they? Why’ve you left me to bear this disgrace? How can I guard this body, this body that is made of salt” (34)?

Without having any support for livelihood in Krishnapuram any more, Dhanabhagyam came with Arumugam, a small child then, to live with her father in Poothurai. The thoughts of her husband, to whom she had never spoken a kind word when alive, haunted her quite often. She now thought that his looks had belied his temperament and manners. Those who did not know him came to the conclusion that he was the worst rogue in the village. But those who knew him wondered at his character. She also thought that Arumugam, their son, was much different from his father because he could not stand still for a minute and hold his tongue even for a moment. Dhanabhagyam, until she came of age, had been equally spirited and playful like Arumugam. Not even a day passed without five or six quarrels. She even beat her playmates, pushed them down and threw sand on their heads. Most boys and girls in
the village would flee on seeing her. If any boy tried to tease her, she never spared them. All these made her earn the nick name ‘Raakshasi’ (a female demon), – which means a she-demon.

Dhanabhagyam observed Arumugam resembling Raman only in stature, but in everything else, he took after his mother. Kizhavar, who first thought that Arumugam resembled his deceased wife, later discerned that he resembled Dhanabhagyam more.

Dhanabhagyam could not forget her life at Krishnapuram. It seemed to her as though they had been married just yesterday, had been living with the mild and never opposing Raman yesterday. And Raman had been gone yesterday. It seemed as though Raman’s body was brought into the house, after which the ritual mourning that went on for eight days and nights, everything had happened just yesterday.

One day Pandiyan, Kizhavar’s nephew, came to Poothurai. He wanted to buy a pair of bullocks and wanted Kizhavar to go with him to the fair. Once, the idea of giving Dhanabhagyam in marriage to Pandiyan was there. Kizhavar’s sister, Malar had been telling others that she would never give up such an alliance. After Dhanabhagyam’s marriage, Pandiyan would come drunk quite often, and parking in front of Kizhavar’s house, would make a scene. Later, Pandiyan married a girl from Kuyilappalayam, after which he stopped coming to Kizhavar’s house. Though he had four children now, he resumed his visits to Kizhavar’s house after Raman’s demise, demanding that Dhanabhagyam should be given in marriage as his second wife. But Kizhavar, who knew his temperament, would ask him to step inside and even provide him with food.

One day, Kizhavar was getting ready to go to the market with Arumugam to sell the baskets woven by him. Pandiyan was already waiting for them at the end of the street. Dhanabhagyam held Arumugam close to her waist and kissed him on his head.
Then let him free to go and join his grandfather for the market. The group was visible to her for some time and after that she could not see them. She stayed at the end of the street for some time and turned back to move homewards, her thoughts still lingering on Arumugam. She wondered what would this young boy be when he returned tomorrow. Tomorrow would happen just as today did. Like tomorrow, next week, next month, next year with all festivals like Pongal and Deepavali would pass too. She says,

He will have become a man by then, and taken up a livelihood. He will marry and have not just one or two, but ten children. They would bite their mother’s nose and ears just as Arumugam bit hers; all this would happen in no time as though it were tomorrow. Tomorrow would arrive, just as yesterday and today did.

Poor Raman, it was not given to him to see his son grow up. “Oh god,” she moaned, she moaned, as she agonized at the way he had met his death. Tears filled her eyes. (39)

In Krishnapuram there was an old woman living next door to the house of Raman, called Chinnammal. Once she came to Poothurai and enquired Dhanabhagayam about Kizhavar and Arumugam and suggested that since Raman had died while at work, she must ask for a job at Oroville. Chinnammal quoted her own case as an example. Chinnammal’s husband had been a bonded labourer in a Nayudu house. When he went to draw water for the paddy field, a snake bit him and he died. The amount paid by the Nayudu family barely covered burial expenses. One of the boys from the cheri [slum] took Chinnammal to Oroville where she sobbed about her plight. They pitied her and made her a sweeper in the hospital. Her salary was five hundred rupees. In like manner
Dhanabhagyam also should ask for a job either in the Adult Educational Centre or the hospital or any of the companies of the Aurobindo Ashram [hermitage].

Dhanabhagyam hesitated and regretted that Kizhavar was not with her at that time to give her some suggestion. When the villagers urged her to go the very day, she started out to Oroville alone. At Oroville a boy from Idayan Chavadi warned her for not having stayed at home. Anyhow, he took her to a room where there was Jerry Albert who stood up and greeted her. He had already seen Dhanabhagyam in the village and had cherished a longing for her. For the past six months he had seen Dhanabhagyam with Arumugam. For some reason or another Arumugam disliked Albert from the very beginning. He would say to his mother that he did not like that ‘Poonayan’ [man with cat like eyes] (39). In spite of his mother’s advice that he must not say such things, he always called him Poonayan.

The Idayan Chavadi boy served as a mediator between Dhanabhagyam and Jerry Albert. After some dialogue Jerry was ready to give her a job as a compensation for Raman’s death. Dhanabhagyam went to Poothurai after saying that she would consult her father and inform about her consent. The Idayan boy came behind her and told her that she could go now but should come back to join work. “When will you folk ever learn? You must give up the old ways – it isn’t everyday that luck comes your way. You should garb it when it does…go, go, now” (47).

Kizhavar was adamant in not allowing her to work when she asked about his opinion. He told her that if there was one thing that she must not ever do, it was going to work. The Idayan boy came to Poothurai twice and abused not only Dhanabhagyam but also Kizhavar, calling them stupid people. When the boy came for the third time Kizhavar asked him about the salary and the other details of the job. The boy said that the work would not be heavy. Kizhavar agreed and Dhanabhagyam set up house in
Krishnapuram the very day and admitted Arumugam in the Thiruchitrambalam Junction Road School. After some time Dhanabhagyam sold her house in Krishnapuram and shifted to Pondicherry where Arumugam was going to school.

On her first day at Oroville she could not understand anything and she was able to adjust to the surrounding only after a month. Her main task was to water and prune the plants, the shrubs and the lawn in front of the meditation hall. She found the work terribly amusing. She was also doing other jobs like peeling nuts, breaking the shells with the stone and such small things. There was something she was very fond of doing, and that was fishing in the waters of the Osutteri Lake. She remembered how Raman travelled to many lakes, often taking her with him. While other woman stayed on the banks, Dhanabhagyam waded into the lake with Raman and netted enough fish for a month’s worth of fish gravy.

Dhanabhagyam was happy over her luck. A salary of five hundred and a Sunday holiday more than satisfied her. And she used to tell her neighbours that it was a miracle and she had not seen anything like that ever since she was born. She liked it very much.

Having sent Arumugam to school at eight in the morning, Dhanabhagyam would reach Oroville at nine and started watering the plants, sweeping the fallen leaves and flowers and so on. She was rarely bored, and watching the people working in the meditation hall was an interesting sight to her.

Dhanabhagyam had tried her best to persuade her father to come to Krishnapuram, pleading with him and sometimes even begging. But he was firm in his resolve to remain in Poothurai. After her continuous persuading, he agreed to visit Krishnapuram on Saturdays and Sundays.
In the meantime Arumugam’s hatred for Jerry Albert grew more and more tense day by day. He mumbled curses on Albert all the time. He did not stop just with that; he also heaped reproaches on Albert to go back to Netherlands, and sometimes he wished him to be dead also. “Why couldn’t he just die?”(58)

There had come certain change in the life-style of the people, especially women working in Oraville, who mostly belonged to Idayan Chavadi, Kuyilappalayam, Sanjeev Nagar and Krishnapuram. They could not give up their sarees yet but in everything else they took after white women, bobbing their heads when they spoke, walking differently and so on. The white women on the other hand had begun to wear sarees and bangles and plaitted their hair wearing flowers like Tamil women. Even students made money from part time jobs in Oroville and went about with white girls. Young girls working in Oroville moved freely with white people, going about with them in bi-cycles, scooters, motor cycles and cars. Bashful or dark-complexioned people were given only inferior jobs, however much they were educated.

It was now two years since they had moved to Pondicherry, Arumugam was able to see, and even puzzled to note, a remarkable change in his mother. In the beginning he noticed that she had to walk down to the house and board two buses, but recently she was brought in the Oroville van and the van came up to her door steps. Besides, she was not tired as before when she came home. “Her skin glowed, and she had gained some weight” (65). What puzzled Arumugam in particular was the faint smell of camphor that wafted from her, when she came home from Oroville. He noticed something else also. “She didn’t smile or laugh as much as she used to, after they came to Pondicherry. Now, she laughs and talks as if she’s a machine” (65).

Again, she made her attempt to bring Kizhavar to Krishnapuram, failing in which she wanted Arumugam to go to Poothurai and bring his grandfather. She believed that
Arumugam was the only one who could bring the old man there. Arumugam promised her to do so. Dhanabhagyam felt that despite good food to eat and a comfortable house to live in, Kizhavar’s absence was a void that could not be filled. Her father’s memory haunted her always.

Dhanabhagyam and Arumugam went to Poothurai in another attempt to bring the old man to Pondicherry. Kizhavar spoke to Arumugam but never uttered a word to Dhanabhagyam, which made her quite unhappy. She fell at Kizhavar’s feet and sobbed, clasping his legs, asking him to speak a word to her. That night Kizhavar ate well the food cooked by Dhanabhagyam, asking for a second and third helping as never before. They started early next morning. At the bus stop Dhanabhagyam pleaded with Kizhavar to come with her. He was again adamant. She bent down and clutched his legs, refusing to go. “I’ve got no one in this world - no kith or kin worth the name. You’re all I have. There’s no point in living if you don’t acknowledge me. I’ll kill myself, that’s for sure. It wouldn’t be too difficult to get a yard of rope, would it?” (76).

Kizhavar lifted her up saying that he would come to Pondicherry the day after tomorrow. Then she boarded the bus with her son. Throughout the journey and all night at home in Pondicherry she was sobbing. “Oh my god, my father knows… what can I do now? Yei Sengeniyamma, you’ve deserted me! I’ve no brothers, sisters, kith or kin to turn to … what am I going to do?”(77). News reached them a little after dawn that Kizhavar had hung himself.

One morning after sending Arumugam to school, Dhanabhagyam stood at the door, watching a long time after the bus had gone. Suddenly, someone shouted ‘Hello’. It was Jerry Albert. Dhanabhagyam was shocked to see him there. She
pleaded with him to go away before somebody saw him. But Albert turned a deaf ear to her pleas, and seizing her neck pulled her in.

That day Arumugam left school at eleven that morning because the school was declared a holiday. One of the school boys had been mangled by a passing car and so the boys had to return home. When Arumugam reached the house, all appeared quiet. He pushed the door open slowly and entered without a sound. He stepped inside and saw the place where his bedding would lie usually rolled up. What he saw there made him dumbfounded. “There was Dhanabhagyam’s well-shaped body, naked, intertwined with another, white one”(82).

Arumugam was broken. He screamed, “Amma”! A pair of cat’s eyes fell into his vision. Arumugam fled, not caring where he ran, but kept running in order to put as much distance as he could from what he had seen. Arumugam was running the whole day as though fleeing from a dreaded enemy, rushing past each street. He ran fast places he knew and places he did not, caught in a frenzy, agony and anger, tears blurring his vision. ‘Amma, Amma.’ he wept, unable to control the cry that escaped his lips. The next instant, he spat out a disgusted ‘Chi chi!’ feeling an intense wave of mortification at having called her so (86).

He could not go now to Poothurai, since Kizhavar was dead. He gulped water to ease his hunger and after some time even walking became difficult with so much water in his stomach. Even to get water he had to pass through many streets, which made him quite tired. His legs faltered because walking became more and more heavy. He could walk no more. He was so tired that he was pushed by the rush of air caused by a speeding lorry carrying road metal. He fell down and lost consciousness.

When Arumugam came to his sense, he found himself lying in a rickshaw. The rickshaw owner Dharmamoorthy woke him up and brought him tea. He asked
Arumugam again and again the details about himself, but got no reply. He thought that the boy must be belonging to a rich family and was lost in the city. He could get only his name from Arumugam but no other information.

Dharmamoorthy belonged to a village near Jenji. He had four brothers and three sisters, and he married his eldest sister’s daughter Lakshmi, with whom he lived for four years, when a primary school was started in the village, with two teachers. Soon the news that Lakshmi had eloped with teacher George Stephen broke his heart. Immediately he left the village and reached Pondicherry. Twenty years had passed since then and for the past ten years he had been pulling rickshaws.

Dharmamoorthy took Arumugam to a hospital, and bought him the medicines and also bought tea and idlies. When Arumugam became all right he was stationed in the beginning as a watchman for Dharmamoorthy’s rickshaw. Later, Arumugam learned the job of pulling rickshaw. Whenever any one hired the rickshaw either to go to the hospital or to Thattanchavadi or any such place, Dharmamoorthy would pull it and Arumugam would walk or run behind the vehicle, and on the way back he would ride on the rickshaw.

After the day’s work, Dharmamoorthy pulled the rickshaw towards a few huts which looked like pigsties, east of Thiruvalluvar Bus Stop on the banks of the drains in the west. Passing some seven or eight huts he halted in front of one hut and rang the bell. A man emerged from inside and ran towards the road. Chinnaponnu walked out after him, adjusting her sari. Dharmamoorthy took out a liquor bottle from the pocket in his shorts and gave it to her.

Dharmamoorthy introduced Arumugam saying that he was our boy now. And he might be of some help to her. He also told her that his name was Arumugam and he would not say anything more. Chinnaponnu took Arumugam inside and offered
some meat to him. But he refused to take it. She did not compel him. Dharmamoorthy sent him out telling him to bed down for the night in the rickshaw. Chinnapponnu offered him a sari to wrap around and Arumugam laid himself down within the rickshaw.

People roamed about the huts in plenty. The voices of women were predominant. Somewhere someone was beating a woman. The woman was screaming and when the man had left after a while, the woman cried behind him, and her words betray what type of place it was and which type of people were living in that place. Arumugam did not want to stay there. He wanted to quit it almost immediately. But he did not know where to go.

Arumugam might have been staying with Dharmamoorthy for almost a month. The last month had brought about a drastic change in him; “he had morphed into a different being almost” (86). After Arumugam had stayed with Dharmamoorthy for fifty days, he went to see his mother. As he started walking along, he could not contain his tears. He was afraid of the mockery of the villagers, and so he walked with head bent down. He did not want anybody to see him. His body began to tremble as he approached the house, and his throat was parched as though he had run a long wide. When he neared the door his legs sagged. Even before he knocked at the door, it opened. A woman there informed him that just a month before they had come to the place. The woman who had been living there previously came a week ago and asked if anybody had come in search of her. When said nobody had come, she left the place sobbing. She had not come back again.

Arumugam was wondering whether his mother would have gone to visit Mangalalakshmi who was the daughter of Pandiyan’s mother Malar. There were no others who could be called their kith and kin. Suddenly he wondered with a shudder
whether she was dead. This thought struck him with agony like a thunderbolt. Immediately he started praying to *Mailam Murugan*. “*Muruga, my mother’s everything to me. Bring her back safe, alive and well, and I’ll break ten coconuts in your temple. I’ll even shave my head on the day of festival. Please, please lead me to where my mother is…” (98).

Arumugam consoled himself by saying that his mother would not have done so, because there were many women like Dhanabhagyam in Krishnapuram. Such happenings had become common, especially after Oroville had been established and companies had been started in places like Metupalayam. In Krishnapuram and Poothurai many women had eloped, many had left their husbands and were now living in sin with other men, but no man or boy had run away from their homes on account of such affairs, as Arumugam had done.

When Arumugam had neared Chinnapponnu’s hut, she was talking to a man. She asked Arumugam to go and wait for some time inside a hut. She dragged the man in the dark and went behind the hut. Arumugam knew what was happening. Unable to digest such things, he started sobbing and even wished that he could pound Dharmamoorthy and Chinnapponnu into a pulpy mess. He could not control his tears and he sobbed aloud crying ‘*Amma*’.

Chinnapponnu came back to say something, but could not proceed beyond broken ‘Arumugam’. She began to cry. Arumugam said that he did not like it and he wanted to return to Poothurai. His relatives were there and he would leave for Poothurai in the morning.

Chinnapponnu pulled Arumugam in an embracement saying ‘Whom do I have to feed me as I go about from one place to another? I’m cursed. I’ve got up with
such words, just for a cup of rice-water. You’re not to leave me as long as I’m alive. Think of me as your mother. Bury me when I die, and then go where you will”. (102)

Vasantha was a Nayudu girl. Her father was a chieftain of Nayudu group in Krishnapuram and he held a position of great respect. No one dared question him when he did something wrong. The whole of Vaanur taluk was the Nayudu territory and each Nayudu house often had four or five families from the cheri, bonded to it in labour. Raman had been a bonded low caste slave himself, working in Vasantha’s house in youth. And Raman’s father also had been the same.

After the development of Oroville and other companies, the cheri people gradually ceased to work for the Nayudu families and went to work in Oroville. The Oroville administration came to know about Jerry Albert and repatriated him. It also dismissed all those who had been recruited by Albert. Vasantha had been one of those recruited by him on the recommendation of Dhanabhagayam who had introduced Vasantha to Albert as “My master’s daughter”(189). Arumugam had seen Vasantha going to school and had admired her good looks. She was a very gentle and well behaved girl. But when she came of age she was seldom seen outside her home.

Vasantha caught sight of Arumugam, one Sunday morning, as he was taking a passenger in the rickshaw to Korimedu Jipmer Hospital. She asked him about Dhanabhagayam but got no answer from him. Arumugam regretted having come across with Vasantha. He kept his head lowered from the beginning and not even raised it once to look at her. While working at Oroville, Vasantha was trapped by the manager. The watchman informed a Krishnapuram youngster about this, and the youngster in turn threatened Vasantha that he would expose everything to her family,
writing it out on the walls of the village. Without knowing what to do she yielded to him.

News of this reached the village and also her family and her brothers thrashed her and even spat on her:

‘Cut her up and bury her, the brazen little bitch. How dare she, and at her age, too?’ ‘You can’t rest well enough without bedding a man, can you?’ ‘Shave her head – stick her face with black and red dots, and throw her out of the village – the blasted whore’s thrown the honour of our Nayudu clan to the winds! Our girls will be ruined if she isn’t taught a lesson. How can we all walk the street wearing a vesti, then?’ (190)

The villagers also abused her and beat her up.

Vasantha felt that her life had betrayed her and she ran away from her village, finally taking refuge in the cardboard company in Mettupalayam.

When she was running away from home, she saw two auto rickshaws coming from Pillai Chavadi nearly collided and went past her, when a female voice screamed “Ayyo, my god!” Twenty or thirty feet behind Vasantha a woman laid screaming, while her vessels lay scattered on the ground. Vasantha helped the woman to rise up. She gathered the scattered vessels, put them in the bamboo basket lying nearby and tried to console Bhagyam who was screaming. Vasantha went with Bhagyam that day and stayed with her from that day onwards.

It was just six days after Arumugam had joined the cardboard company. She told him that after losing her job at Oroville, she took a friend’s suggestion and applied for a job in a cardboard manufacturing company at Mettupalayam. She related one episode after another to Arumugam with her eyes filled with tears. After asking
Dharmamoorthy to look after Arumugam well, she left, telling Arumugam to be there the next day at eight in the morning.

Chinnapponnu had known Kuppusaami through Bhagyam, who was running a mutton shop in Chekkumedu. Kuppusaami was a cook employed by the people for functions like marriage. Bhagyam and Kuppusaami had known each other for the past ten years. According to Bhagyam, Kuppusaami was a good man and she had told about this to Chinnapponnu. Whenever Chinnapponnu met Kuppusaami she would ask him whether Bhagyam had given her a message. Bhagyam arranged workers and helpers for funeral dances, pasting cinema posters on walls and displayed political party flags in streets.

Chinnapponnu was living in Bhagyam’s hut. Bhagyam had run away from home to Pondicherry, having quarreled with her parents-in-law. After running away from home she was in the bus stand for the whole day till night fall. She did not know what to do? It was at this time that Kaja Bhai, Karim Bhai’s father met her. Mistaking her to be a call girl, he approached her and asked her, what was her rate? She got terribly angry, grabbed him by the neck, clutched his hair and spat in his face. Kaja Bhai was taken aback. Kaja Bhai thought that she would not be a Chekkumedu woman. No Chekkumedu woman would have spurned his advances and slapped him. She might be a woman from a good family, who might have either lost her money on a journey or got stranded.

Khaja Bhai gathered courage and approached her saying that he was sorry. He asked her about her village and the reason for her being there that night. In the beginning she refused to answer, but Khaja Bhai persisted in trying to know about her whereabouts. Seeing his persistence, his altered attitude and the gentleness in his tone, eventually she related her present situation and what had happened to her. Khaja Bhai
promised her that he would get her a job and asked her to go with him then and stay with his mother that night. He says, “I’d have gone my way if it were day…but its night, and my conscience wouldn’t let me leave you here. A hundred other men would ask you what I did. I’ve told you what I think is the best. The rest is up to you” (184).

After some hesitation Bhagyam agreed to accompany Khaja Bhai to his house. He built a hut for her by the drain. Till the hut was ready for occupation she stayed in his home. There were not as many huts or people at that time as there were now. Those days the area was used by passers-by as a kind of road side urinal.

It was there that Bhagyam met Chinnapponnu. Chinnapponnu, unlike other women, was a person of few words and calm temperament. She was honest and straight forward and she never liked stealing and lying. Bhagyam was impressed by these qualities of Chinnapponnu, and allowed her to share the home with her. People asked her why she had allowed Chinnapponnu, a woman of no morals to live with her. To them Bhagyam said that it did not matter to her that how Chinnapponnu earned her living and she was her company.

A few years of running a mutton stall in Chekkumedu enabled Bhagyam to buy a piece of land in Mutthamizh Nagar and built a hut there, where she shifted her residence, giving the hut near the drain to Chinnapponnu as a gift. Quite often Bhagyam would give Chinnapponnu clothes, mutton curry and dosai [crepe, made of rice and black gram]. And quite often she had released Chinnapponnu from police custody, either by bribing the police or getting bails in courts. Moreover, whenever Chinnapponnu fell ill, she would advise Chinnapponnu to be careful in dealing with men, and take care of her life. She says to Chinnapponnu, “As if anyone has any idea of right and wrong, these days! Other women manage their affairs so cleverly – why can’t you? Every other woman’s careful to see that the oven’s burning bright at her
home. Draping a sari around you doesn’t make you one, eh? Or is it enough if you 
show off your body?” (186).

Karim Bhai, son of Khaja Bhai, was known as ‘curry shop Karim Bhai’. He used 
to lend money to people owning small business, like mutton shop. He had lent money 
even to Bhagyam and visited Bhagyam and other shop owners for getting the loan or 
interest.

One Sunday Chekumedu was terribly crowded. It was eight at night. Vasantha had 
gone behind the hut to answer the call of nature and Bhagyam was chasing a fellow 
who had gobbled up a dosai but had not paid for it, Suddenly a wild shriek erupted 
some where to the north. Before they could find what it was all above, arrack and 
soda bottles strolled all over the place. Stones and mud were thrown about in all 
directions and bamboo sticks were ripped off the roofs. There was a riot ‘all hell 
broke loose’ (188).

Arumugam packed away the things in his stall hurriedly to close the shop early. A 
log of wood landed near Arumugam and he narrowly escaped. Bhagyam grabbed the 
cash bag and tried to collect the rest of the articles assisted by Arumugam. It was at 
this moment that a large stone fell on Arumugam’s head, and at the same time a soda 
bottle sliced through his ribs. Crying ‘Amma’! he collapsed on the floor.

Vasantha gave a cry of terror, ran towards Arumugam, lifted him as though he 
were a baby and started running. She ran out and tried to stop the passing auto-
rickshaws. But they were hastening to escape the riot, and none of them stopped for 
her. She carried Arumugam on her shoulder as far as the Cuddalore Road, and there 
she was able to get an auto. She took him to the Jipmer Hospital and got him admitted 
there.
Next morning Vasantha picked Arumugam up at the Jipmer Hospital gate and proceeded towards Metupalayam. They entered the Metupalayam Industrial Estate where she introduced him to the manager, recommending Arumugam for a job, saying that he should take complete responsibility of him and that he would be correct in every thing. The strong recommendation of Vasantha gave the manager no option but to appoint Arumugam.

Arumugam was struck dumb as he looked at one big building after another. There were four or five factories specializing in cardboard production. Boys worked briskly in all companies and the cardboard making factories had largest concentration of youngsters. They used to pay wages every Saturday. Arumugam was given one hundred and fifty rupees as his wage for the week. Vasantha told him to give the amount to Chinnaponnu and also asked him to give the flowers, fruits and snacks which she had brought for Chinnaponnu. When he did so, Chinnapponnu was overjoyed and said, “Must you waste whatever you’ve earned? Haven’t I seen such things before?” she chided him. ‘Who are you to buy such things for me?’ she could not control her tears even as she admonished him – she did not know if they were tears of joy or sorrow” (115).

Once when Chinnaponnu was going in the rickshaw, which Arumugam rode, she told him that everyone was asking her how she was related to him. He said there is nothing in relationship and nothing was lost if one did not call the other by a relationship. But Chinnapponnu wanted him to tell her the relationship between them, to which he asked whether he would call her ‘Amma’. Chinnapponnu was very happy to hear this and said that if she had got married, by then she would have had a son of Arumugam’s age.
Arumugam had never before seen Chinnapponnu so happy as she was that day, but his question ‘Should I call you amma!’ (136) destroyed it all. Tears overwhelmed her. She wept aloud, not even caring that they were out in the streets. Arumugam pedalled the rickshaw without speaking a word until they reached the corner of Nellithoppu. He pulled the break when he saw Dharmamoorthy, who came near the rickshaw and asked money for liquor. Chinnapponnu refused to give him money. He begged again, but Chinnapponnu did not relent.

Dharmamoorthy began to scream abuses at her, calling her ‘harlot’. Chinnapponnu kicked him and he fell flat on the back. Soon Dharmamoorthy suddenly started beating Arumugam. Arumugam was taken aback but allowed Dharmamoorthy to beat him, neither protesting nor resisting. Blow after blow fell on him, but not a single sigh or moan escaped his lips. Chinnapponnu stepped down from the rickshaw and kicked Dharmamoorthy from behind. Before he could turn around and gather his wits, she kicked him between his legs. He collapsed, clutching his groin. Pushing him down, Chinnapponnu sat on his chest and gave several blows on his face.

When Arumugam was running away from the scene, Chinnapponnu barred his way and said:

You idiot, he was beating you black and blue – why didn’t you hit back? What’s the good of sprouting a moustache and claiming to be a man? You mustn’t go anywhere as long as I live. You mustn’t be quite so meek, all the time. I’m here for you, aren’t I? Must you run away because that fellow thrashed you?” (139-140)

Cook Kuppusaami was employed to prepare and supply food on special occasions, like marriage when he fell short of the requirement, he requested Chinnapponnu to come with Arumugam, Dharmamoorthy and some girls to assist him in cooking and
serving. During the marriage ceremony Kuppusaami was always shouting at those who went to help him. When he went away to meet the person conducting the marriage, Kasthuri, his wife, began to abuse him. “When will this dog die? So many get crushed to death by cars and buses, don’t they? Ugh, may cholera plague his life out. He seems to be immune to all diseases.” (144)

The reason for such anger for her husband is due to his ill thoughts and deeds. When Kuppusaami wanted Arumugam to steal some food items and take them in his rickshaw to his house; and again he shamelessly tried to indulge in homosexuality with Arumugam, that made him startled. Calling Kuppusaami ‘pig’, Arumugam pushed him away and rushed out as if he were possessed.

The author also portrays what type of woman was Kasthuri. Sivaraman was their son, who had met with a bus accident while in the tenth standard and lost his left arm which had been amputated. He talked a lot whenever he met Arumugam and did not fail to repeat the same question every time. It was about Arumugam’s mother. He used to ask what had happened to his mother and whether he had made any attempts to search for her.

Sivaraman spoke only to Arumugam so much, but spoke only rarely to Kuppusaami or even his mother. He once said to Arumugam that something was very wrong somewhere, but he could not figure it out. “……. Even as I lie down on the thinnai outside, my mother and my uncle are in bed together, inside. It’s that way even now, this moment. How my uncle comes to know the exact day my father goes out to cook, I’ll never know. All my mother has to do is smile, and my father’s struck dumb”(148).

Arumugam tried to console him, telling him that he must let go off everything. Then, suddenly Sivaraman asked Arumugam whether he looked like his father or his
uncle. Arumugam said nothing and remained silent. All such incidents are narrated in
the novel just to inform the readers amidst what type of men and women Arumugam
was living, after he had run away from his mother and, in spite of that how he was
able to guard his character.

When Arumugam walked out, carrying the packets from the marriage kitchen,
Kuppusaami came running and put a twenty-rupee note into his shirt pocket and went
away. Arumugam did not know what to do with the packets. He wondered what had
happened to Dharmamoorthy, who usually would escort him from the marriage hall.

When Arumugam neared Chinnapponnus hut, some policemen were surrounding
it and a crowd of people had gathered there, watching the scene in excitement.
Arumugam could see that women inside the hut were wailing, beating their breasts.
The police men were driving away the onlookers.

Chinnapponnus was dead and the body was transferred to the hospital in an
ambulance. At the sight of Arumugam, Bhagyam cried louder than ever. He could
also see Vasantha there. All the women of Chekkumedu had assembled there. He
found himself clasped by a sobbing woman. It was Bhagyam who cried that his
daughter had gone, leaving her alone. They entered the Jipmer Hospital and went to
the postmortem room. Chinnapponnus body was laid on a granite slab. Vasantha
dragged Arumugam out of the hospital and gave him information about
Chinnapponnus.

Chinnapponnus was trying to grab parties the previous day. At about ten o clock,
when the first show had ended, a crowd had swelled. The harsh voice of a man and
that of Chinnapponnus had been heard by some people from behind her hut near the
drain. No one paid any attention to the voices because they were preoccupied with
grabbling men. Moreover, such scenes were common in the locality.
Next morning Chinnapponnu’s dead body was discovered by some boys who had gone to the bank of the drain to answer the call of nature. There were some marks caused by finger nails around Chinnapponnu’s neck. The man who was quarreling with her previous night must have strangled her and thrown her into the drain.

Arumugam was wondering where Dharmamoorthy had been all these time. He found fault with himself and cursed himself for having left for a cooking assignment the previous day.

The body was brought back. It was cold as ice. Years had gone by since he first met Chinnapponnu but never before had he looked at her face at such close quarters. He ran his fingers over her mouth, neck, chest and stomach. He tried to lift the head and place it on his lap. But Vasantha prevented him from doing so by putting her finger over her lips as a gesture of disapproval. ‘Did she die because she’d suffered so much, and she couldn’t suffer anymore? Why do women like her come into this world?’(164).

The body was buried, and when the burial rites were completed, it was eight at night. Other women left Chekkumedu. Dharmamoorthy hastened away to the arrack shop. Arumugam and Vasantha stayed with Bhagyam till the end.

After the death of Chinnapponnu, Arumugam stayed with Bhagyam and helped her in the sale of non-vegetarian items like mutton and fish as well as tiffin items like dosai and parotta [unleavened bread of maida flour, thick and round in shape]. He used to call customers to come to their stall and thus went on hawking. Bhagyam would sit on a small stool beside Arumugam while Arumugam was serving the customers. At regular intervals he fetched firewood. Customers would usually begin to come to the stall at five in the evening and by seven there would be a large crowd.
The place was a thatched roof twenty to thirty feet long, stretching from north to south. A short mud wall which was only a foot thick supported the sloping thatched roof on the western side and towards the east there was two feet thick mud wall. The eastern wall served as a counter for selling arrack bottles and receiving cash. Farther away there was Bhagyam’s stall, which was the only one within the thatched building. Other smaller stalls were situated outside. To the west of the place there was Naveena Theatre and to the east there was Kuber Bazaar. Customers would be waiting in line in the arrack and toddy shops, quite impatient for getting the drinks soon. Arumugam would call out loudly to those drinking at the arrack and toddy shops while Bhagyam called out the people loitering in front of the stalls and passers-by. Many women would arrive from various localities, mostly from Mutthamizh Nagar area, where Bhagyam lived. They were made to wait outside the huts to grab parties by those who had engaged them for the flesh trade, most of whom were the owners of the huts.

Vasantha was an added attraction to the customers and the crowd would gather there just to enjoy her body glowing in the fire light. She would adopt any tactics to ensure that the food brought from home was sold out, but at the same time she was very keen on leaving Chekkumedu as soon as possible. Bhagyam’s income increased manifold only after Vasantha’s arrival at her shop. She even began to offer loans to other women at Chekkumedu.

Arumugam could not bear to see Vasantha being in charge of customers. This was not the Vasantha he had known in Krishnapuram, Mettupalayam and Oroville. He had stayed with Bhagyam ever since Chinnapponnu’s death over a year and half ago. One day while lying down, he looked at the fan revolving above him. His thoughts went back to the Chekkumedu riot. He wondered what might have happened if he had died in it. He imagined himself lying dead with wounds and blood all over, while flies and
ants crawling over the body: “Would he have shared Chinnapponnu’s fate if he’d
died, with his corpse rotting in a drain? Chinnapponnu had had Dharmamoorthy,
Bhagyam and the women of Chekkumedu to mourn her… who would mourn him?”

(194)

When Arumugam thought that he was an orphan, he started sobbing, wondering
how one could live without a single soul related to him. It was only this fear that made
him grow some relationship with Vasantha and later with Abidha. Vasantha’s care for
him and her consoling words made him imagine that she loved him. Sometimes they
“elbowed, beat, and pinched each other like a newly married couple, laughing
together for a long time” (197).

Once she whispered ‘Arumugam’, and continued to repeat his name. Arumugam
was wondering why she poured out all that happened to her to him. Vasantha asked
Arumugam to fetch water and drank it.

“I thought so,” she said, as soon as he came near her and sat reclining on the
wall, stretching his legs.

“What about?”

“just… something”.

“Tell me.”

“That you would come, now.”

“How did you know?’

“How can I explain if you keep asking for a reason?” she said. ”My heart told
me so.”(213)

Arumugam was wondering many times that how many Vasanthas were there: the
one who had taken him to the cardboard company and got him a job; the one who had
taken him to the hospital all by herself when he got wounded in the riot; and the one who had been sobbing about her fate in life.

Pushpa Mary is another character of some importance in the novel. She was thirty years old, unmarried, having no relations and a refuge from Burma. She was raised and given an education by a Catholic Sister. The Sister died six months after Pushpa Mary took up work. In the course of her duties, Pusha Mary developed intimate relations with a Doctor that made her resort to abortions four times. The doctor asked for a transfer and then got married to someone else.

Vasantha became an intimate friend of Pushpa Mary, who took Vasantha to a number of places, promising her a job. Vasantha explained to Arumugam that Pushpa Mary hated man as a whole. After telling him the story of Pushpa Mary she asked him why such things should happen. She also said there were all kinds of people in the world, and what one had to do to make a living was to keep body and soul together. That was the type of woman Vasantha was, sharing everything about her life to any one.

Eight months after Arumugam had been discharged from the hospital and had gone to Bhagyam’s stall along with Vasantha, Pushpa Mary got Vasantha a job in the hospital. The next day Vasantha left Bhagyam’s house and went to stay with Pushpa Mary. She wanted Arumugam also to come and stay with her, insisting that he should not go to Chekkumedu, because Bhagyam would not leave him in peace. Arumugam continued to stay with Bhagyam, but he stayed for four days with Vasantha and Pushpa Mary. When he was returning to Bhagyam’s house, even at a little distance from Mutthamizh Nagar he could see the area where Bhagyam’s hut had been. There was no sign there for having a habitation in the area. When Bhagyam saw Arumugam, she came running, and grasping him, cried aloud that the police had demolished the
hut of Bhagyam along with other huts. It was a *purampokku* land [land which is not privately owned] and so was cleared by the government, which offered no other alternatives. Bhagyam had repaired the hut that the Chinnapponnu had occupied and they had been staying the past three days. She cursed Vasantha for having gone to stay with Pushpa Mary.

Abidha was Thangamani’s daughter, and they were introduced into prostitution by the broker Sekar, along with others like Valli and Manjayee. Since they were all doing business in Chekkumedu, they were known to Bhagyam and Arumugam. Arumugam developed an intimacy with Abidha. Quite often they used to meet and exchange ideas and sentiments. Sometimes Abitha would pat Arumugam’s cheeks and pinch his thigh fondly at these moments. Arumugam experienced a sudden urge to hug her but remained silent. He abruptly asked her, “Will you come away with me?”(220). Abidha looked at him startled and burst into laughter, and then said him, still laughing, “What did you just ask” (220)? He told her that he was asking her whether she would go away with him.

“Why did you?”
“I just…felt like it.”

“Why must I come with you? she gurgled merrily. Are you going to marry me?”
“Yes.”
“I don’t want to marry you.”

“Why not?”
“There’s no reason. And even if there was, I wouldn’t tell you.”
“We could live together,”

“*Chi poda,* you and your insane wife crazes…!” Abidha began to laugh again.”(220-221)
They were talking as they were walking on the road close to each other. Suddenly, she stopped right in the middle of the road and lifted her sari up to her knees, showing him the bruises caused by the police during a raid. Then abruptly Abidha rushed away with a girl without losing a moment. Arumugam stared at the way Abidha went. He went in search of her. Night had fallen by the time he had completed two rounds of Chekkumedu. He had been peering at each passing face during his two rounds through the area to see whether it was Abidha. At the time two figures went past him. Soon one of them came back, peered at him and asked him whether he was looking for a woman. It was Thangamani.

Arumugam was embarrassed and began to turn back, but Thangamani stopped him and dragged him by his hand. He explained to her that he was just passing by, and he was not used to that and he did not want to, but Thangamani insisted. She said that he did not have to pay and he could just enjoy himself. She said that it was a new party. She had arrived only that day. She thrust a hand into his pocket, pulled out whatever money was in it and walked away to an arrack shop, after pushing him inside a hut against his will. Arumugam was sorry that he would not have gone in search of Abidha, who he thought would have by now returned to Bhagyam’s stall, “Why the hell did I come out here and get trapped into this, by Thangamani (226)?

It was dark and he walked out of the hut. He had taken just two steps when he felt something ‘sticky’ under his feet. He bent down to see what it was. Since it was too dark, he could not make out anything clearly. He shook off with disgust what was sticking to his legs. He struck a match and brought the light to the face of the figure near his legs. “There like a statue made of stone, sat Dhanabhagyam” (227).
Dhanabhagyam clasped Arumugam and hugged him tight. Arumugam gave himself out to her completely yielding to her embrace like a baby clinging to its mother.

Arumugam took Dhanabhagyam to Pushpa Mary’s house in Kurichikuppam. It was midnight when they reached there. Vasantha clasped Dhanabhagyam with a loud cry as soon as he saw her. Pushpa Mary looked at her with awe and took Vasantha out into another room leaving the mother and the son alone. Dhanabhagyam was sobbing for a long time and then said to Arumugam that all that had happened was God’s will and every thing that went wrong was God’s fault and not hers. She dragged Arumugam down, settled him on her lap, caressed his face, chest and stomach and placed her face on his lap and cried,

‘There’s no need to say anything. What’s happened has happened. You’re alive, and that’s all that’s important. This is all that I want. Nothing else matters. Nobody bundles up their bad dreams and carries it around on their heads. Yesterday’s a corpse, and no one keeps a corpse at home. Uproot the past and throw it all away. Don’t we bury dead bodies in the earth? Spit on everything, all the yesterdays, and bury them’. (230-231)

Dhanabhagyam said that she held on to her life only because she wanted to see Arumugam at least once. She had kept some life only because she wanted Arumugam to light her pyre. She did not go wrong willingly. It was the society that was to be blamed, and she let herself to “be a feather, buffeted along by the wind” (232).

She also told him that her thoughts had always been about him. He was the apple of her eye and the red of her blood. He was everything to her, and in all these years his image had not left her eyes even for a moment.

Dawn had set in by the time they fell asleep. Suddenly, Vasantha was crying aloud that how could Dhanabhagyam die when her master’s daughter was still alive. She
could not know what had happened to Dhanabhagyam that she must kill herself. Arumugam woke up and wondered when his mother would have bathed and combed her hair, decked herself and put her sari to the hook in the kitchen ceiling and hung herself. Vasantha asked Arumugam to help her untie the sari and lower the body. Staring at her as though caught in a frenzy of madness, he told her that she would not go over there. He screamed, beating the floor wildly that the body had died long ago and there was no need for him to see a corpse that had already given up its life.

Nothing had ever happened in his life the way he wanted it to be, and nothing that he hated stopped happening. All these show how the poor and helpless Arumugam, his mother Dhanabhagyam and Vasantha suffer a lot in the hands of the masters whom they serve.

The subsequent chapter deals with religious bigotry.