CHAPTER IV
Dalit Representation and Reality: A Study of U R Anantha Murthy’s Samskara

What we must ask is why so few “great” novelists deal directly with the major social and economical outside facts of their existence — colonialism and imperialism — and why, too, critics of the novel have continued to honor this remarkable silence. With what is the novel and for that matter most modern cultural discourse, affiliated, whether in the language of the affirmation or in the structure of the accumulation, denial, repression and mediation that characterizes major aesthetic form? How is the cultural edifice constructed so as to limit the imagination in some ways, enlarge it in the others? How is the imagination with the dreams, constructions and ambitions of official knowledge, with execution knowledge, with administrative knowledge? What is the community of interests that produces Conrad and C. L. Temple’s The Native Races and Their Rulers? To what degree has culture collaborated in the worst excesses of the state, from its imperial wars and colonial settlements to its self-justifying institutions of antihuman repression, racial hatred, economic and behavioral manipulation? (Said, The World 176-77)

In his discussion on the American Left Literary Criticism, Said’s questions raise larger issues regarding the scope of the novel and criticism. Through this chapter, I intend to raise similar questions in the Indian context as to why Indian mainstream literature does not present a realistic picture of Indian society in which millions of Indians face discrimination, abuse and socio-economic marginalisation. I take up
U R Anantha Murthy’s novel *Samskara* to demonstrate this problem. Literature is meant to project and portray society in an objective manner and bring out the inadequacies and problematic issues. However, in the case of the dominant framework of Indian literature which is governed by brahmanic literary patterns, there is always a difference between the reality and representation of the status of dalits. Dalit thinkers have observed that the Indian state and its mainstream literature by and large has shown only a formal and rhetorical commitment to equality as far as dalits are concerned. I contend that this skewed literary projection is aimed at presenting a false image of Indian society and the efforts to exclude the caste realities amount to perpetuating the inhuman history of discrimination.

**Construction of ‘Centre’ and ‘Margin’: a contemporary view**

The act of understanding the problematic of ‘centre’ and ‘margin’ in relation to the Indian nation at a time when the dominant discourses of globalisation try to obliterate the very concept of national identities is a huge and complex task. In the larger context, the aggressive ‘free market’ theories in the era of globalisation have developed many ways and means to erode the sovereignty of the underprivileged nations under the powerful web of the hegemonic and highly industrialized nations like the U.S. The eternal ‘post-colonial condition’ of the erstwhile colonies where a kind of dependent nationalism was forged through colonial administration promises a perennial dependency. India, among the other post-colonial nations stands out as a classical case of this condition. The unanswered questions of our post-colonial condition even after nearly sixty years continue to threaten our very existence. Moreover, the reproductions of colonial modes of social and political practices reinforce and perpetuate the dominant structures of thought in our institutions of democracy as well as in our public consciousness.
As a result, we continue to witness the fragmented social space today which predominantly remains communal and parochial. There are sections in Indian society which feel themselves marginalized and others who find no mention in the mainstream business and are isolated altogether. Like any other nation that basically remains a prison-house for different social identities within it, we too face a paradoxical situation. It is true as Homi K. Bhabha says, a nation is Janus-faced. This is truer in the case of the nations which never tried to establish their empires. The imperial nations while advocating freedom and full sovereignty at home have not ceased oppressing other nations.

The nation, by its very nature, should be sovereign. But the conditions under which the post-colonial nations exist are bereft of this very axiomatic characteristic as the empires continue to exercise their control through direct and indirect means. The post-colonial nations are pushed to such extremes today that total integration remains impossible within their own space. India is one colossal example for this condition.

In the post-colonial nations, we experience a double ambivalence. That is to say, if the concept of nation in its classical development in western history contains an intrinsic ambivalent space that produces and reproduces the condition of inequality for various social groupings which constitute it, the post-colonial nation acquires a doubly ambivalent nature which variously defines its relationship with the erstwhile imperial powers outside and the various underprivileged social sections within. Thus, under the present conditions of aggressive globalisation processes initiated by the hegemonic powers that reproduce the colonial structures of oppression, the nomenclature of ‘post-colonial’ has lost its value. There is a strong need to scrutinise those levels of internal subordination or colonization and the narratology employed to perpetuate that.

Like in the case of Indian nation, the dalits, a significant section of the Indian population, are treated worse than animals. Their presence is usually
banned from upper-class localities. In violation of all constitutional provisions, they are not allowed to move freely and in some cases, are bound to hang clay pots from their necks so that they may not pollute the streets of the privileged by their spittle. They carry brooms tied to their bodies so that while passing through such ‘upper lanes’ they can wipe away their footprints. I argue that the ‘post-colonial’ condition of dalits remains the same and all the lofty claims of Indian nationalism in relation to creating equal space for all participative identities are hollow.

The conflicting and contending social forces within our social space cannot be reconciled as long as we continue to face the use of our own age-old systems of hegemonic practices and those that we acquired from our colonial masters. Thus, the post-colonial oppression is a double oppression with the continued existence of the indigenous oppressive instrument (caste) and the ones promoted by coloniser side by side on the underprivileged social grouping.

Apart from the state apparatus that was inherited from the colonial administration, we have the instrument of social and cultured discrimination within our society. Majoritarianism, obscurantism and divisive strategies employed by the hegemonic strata have played havoc with the underprivileged like those of religious minorities, national minorities, dalits, adivasis (indigenous people) and women. As a result, today we see the chasm between different categories of identities of people widened and many sections feel more alienated than they felt in 1947. Under these intricate conditions, there is no simple way in which one can imagine a road map for the ‘national integration’. Even after nearly 60 years of our post-colonial existence, one has to address the questions at a deeper level to understand the problematic by way of comprehending various minority strats.

The question before us: who are minorities? And with reference to whom they are minorities? The common-sensical notion of ‘minorities’ is no better in informing us than the highly prejudiced understanding attached to the term that is
prevalent in our society. A number of social groups which feel that they do not have a proper space in society are considered to be the minorities. It is not in terms of numbers that they are minorities but because of the public space that they are allowed to occupy in a predominantly hegemonic structural society. As Marx said famously: “They cannot represent themselves. They must be represented”. The limited space for their representation is the criterion to understand them as minorities. We should not understand that their desire is for achieving greater space in this hierarchical social structure that India as a nation provides but to desist and erase such dominant structures of societal power where some have space and others have none.

In this sense, every social group in the country has become conscious of its identity. The Women, dalits, adivasis, national minorities and religious minorities who have certain specific problems of their own, are important and their problems have to be taken cognizance of. For example, dalits as a special social group, is peculiar to the obnoxious caste-ridden Indian society. They constitute around 17.5 per cent of the population. A vast majority among them (over 90 per cent) belongs to the landless, peasant and other wage-earning sections and contribute a major chunk to the national income through their labour. But they are the victims of social oppression and upper caste atrocities and discrimination in all spheres of life. The most heinous and inhuman manifestation of this social oppression is the practice of untouchability which is still practiced in most parts of the country. In fact, a majority of forms of social oppression are practiced against them. Their attempt to achieve a certain degree of self-respect is not fully appreciated in society. Even the constitutional provisions to do away with the discrimination against dalits have not been implemented as the Indian state by and large has not changed its nature.

Similarly the adivasis or the tribes residing in the hilly regions, forests and other regions of India constitute about 7 per cent of the population. The adivasis
feel deprived of their land and other traditional means of livelihood. The process of breaking up their traditional economies, society and culture and their forcible assimilation into the so-called mainstream is at an unprecedented pace today. The attempts to convert adivasis into various religions with the backing of the state have been going on for a long time. This conversion was a hallmark of the British rule. Christianity spread on a considerable scale into the vast tracts inhabited by the adivasis and after 1947, the Hindu fundamentalist forces have been trying to revert the process. As the regions inhabited by the adivasis are rich in mineral deposits and forest wealth, the agencies of the outside world have shown special interest in exploiting these regions through mining, quarrying and such other activities.

There seems to be no end to the problems faced by dalits. In their long struggle for equality, India’s dalits or ‘untouchables’, have often exchanged their Hinduism for Islam, Christianity, Sikhism or Buddhism, believing that they will be able to improve their lives by doing so. They have been persuaded that Hinduism, with its varna ashramas (caste distinctions), has been solely responsible for all their ills. But when they switch to other religious faiths and experience the same distinctions, albeit in different forms, they realize that such a change neither improves their social status nor remedies their economic problems of unemployment and poverty. Sikh places of worship have separate quarters for dalit Sikhs. High-caste Muslims do not marry dalit Muslims. Dalit Christians can hardly hope to reach any high position within the church. They are not even allowed to occupy the pews meant for higher-caste Christians. Buddhist monasteries also have not been able to prevent their converts from continuing their earlier casteist practices.

So far, I have been trying to introduce the position of dalits as minorities, an enormous class of people subordinated by mainstream religion, castes, occupations and literary representations. This rest of this chapter will analyse the
dalit question with particular reference to U R Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara* and counterpoise that with Omprakash Valmiki’s work *Joothan* to view the questions attached with the issue of representation. Do dalits follow a culture which is oppositional to the dominant culture celebrated as ‘the Great Tradition’? Is it true that dalit culture is part of ‘the Little Tradition’ waiting to be appropriated into the dominant sanskritic tradition. Is dalit a homogenous category as it is usually perceived?

**The Literary perspective**

I take up two literary works of great repute which describe in detail the trials and tribulations undergone by the dalits. The first work is U R Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara* which is written in a revisionist and critical mode. Anantha Murthy is one of the few authors who have explicitly seemed to investigate in the system of caste hierarchy. I will try to show that his act of revision is partial as he stops while pointing to some of the ills of the brahmanical way of living and fails to indicate available alternatives. The author cannot envisage a role for oppressed people and sees no fault in the divisive system of caste. The other work is an autobiography by Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*. *Joothan* is taken up because it delivers a first hand account of a dalit’s life. I focus on the level of narrative variation in these two novels. *Samskara* is originally a Kannada novel which was translated by A K Ramanujan in 1976. *Joothan* was originally written in Hindi and I refer to its English translation by Arun Prabha Mukherjee.

U R Anantha Murthy is one of the most important representatives of the new movement in the literature of the Kannada language and is counted among the most eminent Indian authors. The central themes in Anantha Murthy’s literary production are the exploration of the caste system, religious rules and traditions as well as the ambivalent relationship between the handed down cultural value system and the new values of a changing world. Born in 1932 in the village of Melige in Karnataka, Anantha Murthy visited a traditional Sanskrit school there.
He grew up, as he says, as a Gandhian socialist and later studied English and comparative literature in Mysore and Birmingham where, in 1966, he worked for his Ph.D. He was professor of English literature for several years at Mysore University and later vice chancellor of the Mahatma Gandhi University in Kottayam, the chairman of the National Book Trust and President of the Sahitya Academy, the Indian Literature Academy.

Anantha Murthy began his literary career in 1955 with the story volume *Endendhigu Mugiyada Kathe*. Since then he has published four novels, one play, six short story volumes, five poetry volumes and six essay volumes in Kannada and several pieces of literature in English. His works have been translated into several Indian and European languages and have been awarded important literary prizes, including the Jnanpeeth Award (1994), the most renowned Indian literature prize. His most well-known novel is *Samskara* which was written in 1966. *Samskara* means “culture” as well as “ritual” but also means “death rites”. It tells the story of a young Brahman-priest, Naranappa, who pays little attention to strict rules of the village community. When he dies of an epidemic, the village inhabitants refuse to do the funeral rites for him. But the predicament is that as long as he is not burned, they have to starve. The novel looks for the answer to the question: What is *Samskara*? Is culture only maintained if tradition is followed with blind fervour? Anantha Murthy tries to question discrimination through the caste system and the repressive belief practice of the brahmins in his other works also. In another novel *Bharatipura* (1973), he takes up an analogous theme in which a brahmin and land owner, Jagannatha, goes back to his home town which is bound strongly to caste and tries to change the social structures there after his return from England. He wants to enable the untouchables to enter the temple and with this, meets the resistance of the higher caste.

Anantha Murthy has engaged himself primarily with themes of social reform and review of the old traditions followed in society. But if his literary
production, particularly *Samskara*, is put to the test of intensive reading, one can argue that his attack against the religious tradition of brahminism is largely superfluous and in fact he ends up in strengthening the same. If we compare the case of Anantha Murthy with that of Raja Rao who is an out-and-out upholder of the tradition of brahminism, we may surprisingly not find major differences.

Anantha Murthy does not comment anything directly at the caste system but the ambience that he creates in his works clearly suggests his inclination towards the continuation of this tradition of brahmanism. His protagonist, Praneshacharya, in *Samskara* is said to have all the qualities of a brahmin. By contrasting the brahmanic Praneshacharya - his religiosity and respect for traditional values like devotion to God and respect for the institution of marriage with Naranappa, Anantha Murthy celebrates the caste system. Anantha Murthy’s act of giving no space or recognition to the likes of Chandri, Naranappa’s mistress, suggests the writer’s subtle advocacy of brahminism. All the Hindu Gods he mentions with reverence like Vishnu, Krishna and Rama are all protectors of this *dharma*. Anantha Murthy supports all that Raja Rao upholds in the name of ‘Brahman’.

Anantha Murthy’s two major characters, Naranappa and Praneshacharya, remain confused like Ramaswamy in *The Serpent and the Rope*. Both the brahmins appear to be average human beings as Naranappa surrenders his sense of religion for the carnal pleasures of life and Praneshacharya faces a strong dilemma to the very end whether to share his weaknesses with his fellow men or not.

The novel symbolizes a clash of values represented by Naranappa and Praneshacharya. Naranappa belongs to the close-knit community of the Madhva brahmins. He lives in a brahmin village but eats meat, drinks and keeps a low-caste mistress, Chandri. Naranappa’s rebellious behaviour is a source of intense resentment and hatred in the community. When he dies of the plague, no one is willing to cremate him. But as long as his body lies in the village, the brahmins are
not allowed to touch food or water. No one dares touching Naranappa’s sinful, contaminated corpse. As only a brahmin can cremate another brahmin, Chandri places all her jewellery at the feet of the leader of the community, Praneshacharya, for the expenses.

A seasoned brahmin scholar, an ascetic in his home where he tends his ailing wife, Praneshacharya is now faced with a moral problem. In order to lay their hands on the gold and end the pangs of hunger in their bellies, the brahmins suddenly vie with each other to cremate Naranappa. Praneshacharya spends a fruitless night pouring over the scriptures. In his dream he confronts the sneering Naranappa, reliving an encounter in real life, when he had failed to convince the self-proclaimed heretic of the righteousness of following God’s path. He prays to Lord Maruti at the temple but the God gives no answer to his dilemma. Assailed by doubts, weary with starvation, he comes out of the temple to find Chandri waiting for him. When she falls at his feet, a subconscious need for the long denied warmth of a woman’s body and the comfort from it makes him draw her into a closer embrace. Carried away by the passion of the moment, they make love in the night, violating all the codes that had so long held their society together. When no one can offer a solution to the problem of Naranappa’s cremation, a group of Naranappa’s drunken disciples, resolved to cremate their leader, come to his house the same night but are frightened away by the rats that infest the place. The whole village is swarming with rats carrying the plague from home to home. Women and children start leaving the village. Praneshacharya’s wife dies and facing a personal dilemma, he too leaves the village. On his metaphorical pilgrimage, Praneshacharya befriends the gregarious low-caste, Putta and comes to terms with the basic hypocrisy of his life. He comes back to the deserted village to cremate Naranappa himself in an act of expiation.

Though Anantha Murthy has questioned some aspects of social functioning, his idea of critiquing brahmanism appears hollow and holds no weight as he does not talk of an alternative paradigm of social behaviour and relations. The author
has himself made it clear that he intends to interrogate the issue of caste which continues to haunt Indian society from times immemorial. The first aspect of my argument is that the text describes in great detail the lifestyle of the brahmins. The two most talked about characters (Naranappa and Praneshacharya) symbolize the brahmanic system. The novel presents detailed pictures of the village agrahara (clusters of houses in a village where Brahmins live) as to how do brahmins conduct themselves in their day to day life. Though Anantha Murthy is looking at the brahmanical domination with a revisionist approach, he does not see or assign any role for the marginalized sections. Naranappa and Praneshacharya prevail predominantly over the whole scenario and there are only oblique references to low-caste characters.

Nowhere in the novel do we hear of the real feelings of Chandri, Belli or Baghirathi. Their voices seem to be insignificant. We do not know what they think of the brahmin men nor do we know whether they feel exploited even at the hands of Praneshacharya because for all his goodness, he does represent parasitic brahminism. As for the upper caste women in the novel, they are not seen to attack the existing social system based on hierarchies but try to make the most from within its confines to their advantage even though they meet with resistance from their husbands and other male relatives. The brahmin male’s liking for subaltern women is basically a form of sexual gratification which invokes helplessness, exploitation and pain for the helpless women. Anantha Murthy is indifferent to the psychosexual trauma that these women have to endure. Nor does he highlight their personal anguish at having to endure sexual harassment. Similarly, in the world outside fiction, crimes against subaltern women go unreported and are hardly considered seriously for it is the women who are often blamed for the problems that have been inflicted on them. If we consider the novel as being a part and product of the social set-up, then it also suffers from the existing social evils and does not provide impetus to the spirit of progress and social reform.
The ostensible focus of the novel is Praneshcharya’s consciousness that is reinforced by the powerful and recurrent use of socially sanctified myths. Praneshcharya’s ordered life and his strict observance of rituals are portrayed with a view to establish the atmosphere of tradition and custom imperative to Hindu Society. The novelist takes for granted the various Hindu myths and weaves his plot around them. Hindu-brahmanic ideas, rather, extend to all walks of Praneshcharya’s life, something which is respected by one and all in the agrahara. The people in the agrahara accept brahminism per se and continue to live happily in their well-defined lives. Their habits, their emotions, their sentiments, in short, their entire life, is governed by the rituals of brahminism. They never attempt or indeed desire to challenge it. This is well brought out in the description of the events following Naranappa’s death.

The caste system is the world’s largest surviving hierarchy and is based on the principle of purity and superiority, qualities that one is supposed to inherit by birth. If the caste system had been done away with, Naranappa would have been given a decent funeral and Praneshcharya would not have had a sexual encounter with Chandri. Praneshucharaya’s own existence worsens under the oppression of caste rules as he could have easily married Chandri following his wife’s death. Therefore, throughout the novel, caste comes out as a defining feature of Samskara and its shadow continues to haunt all the characters. Not one character in the novel can think beyond caste nor make any attempt to destroy it. The caste system has survived because of the security that it sometimes provides people occupying superior positions. Chandri does not know her way out after the violation of the norms of Hindu society. After performing Naranappa’s cremation with the aid of Muslims, she does not know which way to go. It is clear that Chandri is made to think within the tyrannical Hindu-brahmanical system and is unable to break free of its taboos. She is not allowed to be an active agent controlling her own destiny.
Another aspect of caste based discrimination which *Samskara* presents before us is related with the taboos which prohibit a brahmin to eat food touched/prepared by a member of a lower caste. Religious documents like the *Vashistha Dharma Sutra* specify what may be eaten and what may not. It stipulates that a brahmin can not consume anything from a Sudra. The caste hierarchies accept and encourage a rigid structure of social inequality – the greater one’s purity, or lack of contact with pollution, the higher one’s rank. Dasacharya, one of the brahmins in the novel, is afraid of social criticism, if he openly eats food at Manjayya’s place. Being a *Smarta*, Manjayya is considered to belong to a lower sect of brahmins. Dasacharya is afraid that if he eats “cooked stuff in a *smarta* house” (57), he may be boycotted by his own sect, “I do not really mind eating in your house but if those rascals in our agrahara hear about it, no one will invite me to a ceremony again. What can I do Manjayya?” When Manjayya amusingly assures him of secrecy, Dasacharya asks for some milk, jaggery and flat-rice. Secretly delighted that an agrahara brahmin has come to eat with them, his wife gleefully serves. Naranappa, before he dies, does not practice such discrimination, yet Chandri is unable to come to terms with such unorthodox behaviour. She repeatedly requests him to not eat food cooked by her (45). The readers get the feeling that society could perhaps pardon Naranappa for having a close relationship with a low caste prostitute but not the fact that he ate what Chandri cooked is a graver sin. Lakshmana’s statement, in which he lays emphasis on the fact that he, in addition to having a mistress, even ate food cooked by her, makes it amply clear.

It is believed that contact with a person of lower caste can alter one’s purity and may require some form of remedial procedure such as taking a bath or changing clothes. When Chandri calls at Praneshcharya’s home to inform him about Naranappa’s death, he is yet to take his meal. The readers are told how he will have to bathe again to purify himself if he talks to Chandri before taking his
If the Acharya talked to her, he would be polluted; he would have to bathe again before his meal” (2). Being a traditional brahmin, Praneshacharya has been conditioned not to eat food cooked or served by a person who belongs to a lower caste. It is a commonly followed practice as other people know and respect this constraint.

In the course of the novel, Putta takes the Acharya to a brahmin restaurant for coffee, telling him that they keep a special place inside for orthodox brahmans like him. Still fearing the presence of some familiar person, the Acharya is worried as it may have a ripple effect later on, if “someone sees the crest jewel of Vedanta philosophy drinking a cup of polluted restaurant coffee” (115). Afraid of entering a temple and eating there during the period of his wife’s mourning, he realizes that he would never have the courage to defy brahmin practices as Naranappa had done (116).

Many anthropologists have remarked on the critical importance of pollution to the caste system. A non-brahmin, particularly a shudra, an untouchable, is never considered clean enough either to share food with a brahmin, or even touch him. When Chandri requests Sheshappa, the cartman, to cremate Naranappa’s body, he refuses: “Chandravva that can not be done. Do you want me to go to hell, meddling with a brahmin corpse? Even if you give me all eight kinds of riches, I can’t” (69-70). The internalization of caste hierarchies can also be seen in Putta’s attempts to climb the caste ladder by denying the social background of his mother. He tells Praneshacharya that he is a Malera; his mother belonged to a lower caste and was not married to his father who was a high-class brahmin. He flaunts the sacred thread and claims that all his buddies are brahmin boys (112).

Samskara presents a vivid picture of a society which has accepted caste discrimination as a norm. Anantha Murthy accepts that without question. His novel has unquestioningly accepted brahmin eminence and pushed the lower caste people to the margins where they cease to have any significance. The brahmans are
supposed to be the spiritual and temporal guides, teachers and exponents of law, whereas the *shudras* perform menial services only. They are refused even the semblance of equality. Their hutmments are quite a distance away from the brahmin agrahara (39). The abject poverty of their life is also discernible. They depend on manual labour for their livelihood. Chinni and Belli pick up cow dung. They are treated with indifference. Chinni begs for something to eat, standing at a distance from a brahmin woman, “please, avva, throw a morsel for my mouth, avva” (58). Betel leaf, betel nut and tobacco are thrown at her from some distance. Such an incident, on the one hand, highlights the extent of untouchability practiced in Indian society and on the other, projects the dalit characters without any initiative and substance. The issue of representation is raised by many dalit writers, philosophers and theorists. They believe that all literature by non-dalit writers having dalits as characters does not do justice to their identity. If at all they find a mention, they are systematically reduced to an insignificant set of bones, without brains. This is done without exception even when dalits perform some of the most important activities at all levels. In real society, dalits are the ones who do all hard work in agricultural fields and factories and contribute significantly to the working of the Indian nation.

The closed character and inescapability of caste also comes out in *Samskara*. Naranappa who had violated all the taboos propagated and fostered by the brahmanic culture of the agrahara continues to be a brahmin till the end of his life. He cannot be treated like an outcaste and “remains a brahmin in his death” (9). He had sneered at the Praneshacharya and all his brahmin ways during his life. He had refused to marry a relative as is ordained by custom. He had wanted to roll up all brahmanic respectability and “throw it always for a little bit of pleasure with one female” (21). He took his Muslim friends to the Ganapati temple stream and caught the sacred free-swimming and trusting fish. Even after his gross neglect and violations of all traditional norms, the brahmins do not want any non-brahmin to touch his dead body as this may invite wrath from the heavens.
Praneshacharya who embodies a virtuous facet of the traditional brahmanic cult proves to be an ordinary person in the end as he cannot resist the temptations of ordinary life. Even in his period of wandering and deviation, he is approached by a villager who requests him to read ‘a bit of future’ (95). Praneshacharya also recognizes this when he was about to perform the routine brahmin functions by sheer habit, reigns himself suddenly and ruefully ponders that one can not run away from one’s caste: “Even if I leave everything behind, the community cling to me, asking to fulfill duties the brahmin is born to”(96).

The voices of all marginalized sections (women, outcastes) are weak and incoherent babble. The significant point is that Chandri, a lower caste woman, who possesses the profundities and complexities of a human mind and also an acute practical sharpness, has not received positive attention. Even against all odds, she tries to arrange Naranappa’s cremation. When Sheshappa indicates his inability to meddle with a brahmin corpse, she seeks the help of a Muslim acquaintance. Without bothering for religious rituals, she carries the corpse to the cremation ground and burns it. Praneshacharya, the high priest, retains his superior place, his stature remains undiminished and the author seems to sympathize with him a great deal. Praneshacharya’s logic is based on an otherworldly and mysterious rationale of religion and his method of taking decisions is at times based on blind chance, as he does much to his approval of the other brahmins of the agrahara and surrounding areas like placing of flowers on Maruti’s shoulders.

But within the novel, only the oppressed sections come under attack and Praneshacharya is venerated for believing in obscurantism. This presumptuous understanding of the Hindu faith results in a false consciousness that goes against all subaltern sections, leads the hierarchy to gain mastery and control of the ostensibly recalcitrant others. Naranappa’s logic that is based on his discrete understanding of the selected myths and Hindu treatises is treated as a false consciousness even though it presents a radical understanding of the Hindu view.
of life and is definitely more modern and broadminded. Any logic that goes against the established order and its norms or is inimical to its chosen ends becomes an object that has to be attacked. Whatever Naranappa says is subordinated by brahmins by pointing an accusing finger at his philistinism and disregard for sanctioned behaviour for the Madhava males. His engagements are never refuted with counter logic but merely brushed aside and condemned. Matters are always seen from the selective lens of religion which is consistent with brahminism. When Naranappa says that Lakshmana is so greedy that “he will even lick a copper coin off a heap of shit,” (24) he portrays the real weakness of brahmins for money. Through Naranappa, Anantha Murthy demolishes the myths surrounding brahmins by criticizing their greed for money and gold but also for the marriages which are arranged not so much according to the ruling stars, or on the bases of *gunas* in the horoscopes but for economic gains. The author makes it clear that it is not Naranappa who is degenerated but the rest of the brahmin community. Most of the brahmins portrayed in the novel are hypocritically selfish, greedy, narrow-minded and even short-sighted, who take shelter behind the ancient Hindu classics, its high sounding principles and the traditional morality which serve as masks to hide their contemptible self. Not surprisingly, the entire agrahara throws brickbats at Naranappa after his death, something they were unable to do when he was alive. In the words of Lakshmanacharya:

> I am not the sort who would hide anything about him just because he was my close relative. He was my wife’s uncle’s son. We tolerated him and sheltered him in our lap as long as we could. In return, what does he do? He comes to the river in full view of all the Brahmins and takes the holy stones that we have worshipped for generations and throws it in the river and spites after it. Condone everything if you wish – but didn’t he, willfully before our eyes, bring Muslims over and
in the wide open frontyard, eat and drink forbidden things? If any of us questioned him, in good faith, he would turn on us, cover us with abuse from head to foot. As long as he lived, we just had to walk in fear of him. (7)

It is noteworthy that this so-called high class group flex their muscles only when the disobedient and the outcast brahmin Naranappa is no more. This also shows the weakness of their belief, their fear and their lack of firmness.

Praneshcharya’s thinking undergoes a sea-change after his sexual contact/intercourse with Chandri. His single track mind starts seeing not just the light of God but shades that are inescapable for ordinary mortals. It is his acceptance of the more controversial side of life that his religion negates and his subsequent attempts to come to grips with his own situation, that makes him a truly credible character: It is the honesty with which he tries to come to grapple with his own inner self that makes him a likable personality. After all, he did indulge in sexual activities that neither his station in the Madhava community nor his religion could ever approve. In our eyes he does not fall as a man because he does not try cheating himself with falsehoods:

He remembered the first maxim of yoga, “yoga is the stilling of the waves of the mind”. “But No!’, “put aside even the consolation of recitations and God’s holy names, stand alone,’ He said to himself. May the mind be like the patterns of light and shade, the forms of branching trees give naturally to sunshine, light in the sky, shadow under the trees, patterns on the ground. If, luckily, there’s spray of water – rainbows. May one’s life be that sunshine. A mere awareness, a sheer
astonishment, still, floating still and self-content like the sacred brahmini-kite in the sky (91).

As mentioned earlier, there is a clear shift in Praneshacharya’s thoughts after his experience with Chandri and his wanderings. He realizes after witnessing the cock-fight with Putta that “one part of lust is tenderness; the other part is a demoniac will.” (22) The sexual experience for him is so overpowering that it becomes a manifest dream in which there is a simultaneous production of past and present that fantasizes the future. It is the pull of sex, all that his own wife Bhagirathi lacked, that suspends his rational faculties. It is not Chandri that he fantasizes about. It is Belli. The uncanny fusion of terror and excitement is the insoluble dilemma that he must enact or die. The erotogenic pleasures arise in the middle of the prolonged death scenes, be it Naranappa or a bird. It is not just Chandri but “Belli’s earth-coloured breasts”; if there are thoughts of Bhagirathi ‘the alter of his sacrifice’, he also cherishes the prospects of sleeping with Padmavati. Thus, we can say that just like an ordinary human-being and unlike the “crest jewel of Vedanta Philosophy”, Praneshcharya’s sexuality due to repression knows no bounds once it is given a free play.

It is not only in this creative work that all the subaltern voices are subordinated; history is filled with such instances. In fact, there is a systematic effort to do so in the writing of history. The marginalisation of dalits in Samskara is quite in keeping with the historical biases and tradition. What Gramsci had to say about their lack of a collective identity is true for our purposes also because the subalterns fail to rally behind Chandri or others whenever they are pitted against the brahmins. The precondition for strength is their being unified or attaining a collective dominant position which the brahmins would not allow. The fever of brahminism loosened by Naranappa’s death imposes itself on the subalterns and the ‘temperature curves’ of the high born lower only when they have castigated the subalterns with full-throated ease. Naranappa’s funeral causes
a rupture between the past and the present and helps refigure their wisdom in the middle of the plague. The dissent embodied by the presence of Muslims, with received thought becomes an attempt to question the tyranny of sacrosanct and arbitrary brahmin thought. The lower castes or subalterns are treated like objects which need constant surveillance by the brahmins. Chandri’s initiative in Naranappa’s cremation is significant and path-breaking as it is an enabling step for other subalterns – it is revolutionary for the reason that it hints towards a contestion of the brahmans.

The brahmin and lower caste communities are a segregated lot although crossing of borders does take place off and on. Whenever this happens, the latter are exploited. Attempts are made to absorb the subalterns within the brahmin society by reducing them to servitude and by grabbing their meagre possessions. The lower castes in the novel never attack the brahmins verbally or by use of force. The novel connives in stereotypical subjectification of the people figuring down below in the caste-hierarchy, though Chandri appears to be an exception as her challenging decision about the funeral symbolizes the subaltern’s latent capacity for activist ingenuity. Their fragmented identities are taken advantage of by Hinduism’s patriarchs against whom Chandri unwittingly plays the role of a subversive agency. Not many critical opinions are in her favour as not many critics have weighed her beyond her role as a prostitute. The novel does not provide any space to her or help her conceptualize any alternative form of sociality. Putta, by harping on his father being a Brahmin, tries to foist an alternative genealogy in terms of Hindu logic and thinking. Therefore, within Samskara, the subalterns appear as a broken people, partially because of their lack of any homogeneity, for there are categories and divisions among the subalterns/ dalits also.

There is a fundamental difference between dalit and non-dalit writers and thinkers in the ways they analyze and interpret various facets of society and history. On the subject of representing the dalit voice, non-dalit authors are either
hesitant or merely sympathetic. The sheer anguish that the dalit community has experienced historically is missing in their narratives and stories. As Omprakash Valmiki writes:

Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman and compassionless towards dalits. (Joothan, Preface)

‘Joothan’ literally means scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or for the family pet in a middle-class urban home. It is related to the word ‘jootha’, which means polluted and such scraps are characterized as ‘joothan’ only if someone else eats them. Surprisingly, there exists no equivalent word in the English language. India’s Untouchables have been forced to accept and eat ‘joothan’ for their subsistence for centuries. The word encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of this community, which has lived at the bottom of India’s social pyramid for millennia. Although untouchability was legally abolished in the constitution of the newly independent India in 1949, dalits continue to be threatened by discrimination, economic deprivation, violence and ridicule.

Dalit autobiographies basically constitute a challenge to this institutional narrative by presenting what they claim are ‘factual’ experiences of untouchability from the writer’s own life. Valmiki, for instance, does this by repeatedly narrating his experiences of pain as exclusion due to the continued practice of untouchability. He writes, “I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendents of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door” (16). In another instance,
Valmiki relates how he was continually kept out of the chemistry lab ‘on some pretext or the other and despite protesting to the head master of the school, nothing was done to enforce the equality of every student. He writes, “Not only did I do poorly in the lab tests in the board exam, I also got low marks in the oral, even though I had answered the examiners questions quite correctly”(133-34).

**Can a dalit speak?**

Conventionally, Indian literatures have either ignored Untouchables or portrayed them as victims in need of saviors, as objects without voice or agency. Valmiki has broken new ground with an alternative recording of these unrepresented experiences and that is why I find him as a useful and fitting contrast to expose mainstream literature. He narrates the stories of the Untouchable caste of Chuhra who exist at the bottom rung of society; He recalls his heroic struggle to survive this preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution, the cruel obstacles he overcame to become the first high school graduate of his neighbourhood; his awakening under the influence of the dalit political leader B. R. Ambedkar and his transformation into a speaking subject bearing witness to the oppression and exploitation that he had to endure as an individual and as a member of a stigmatized and oppressed community.

It is important to clarify that dalit literature is the outcome of a severe battle as it is not literature per se associated with a movement to bring about change in the social structure and thought. The ‘Mainstream’ literature customarily takes the middle and the upper castes as its subjects and thus grossly ignores the dalits. It is relevant to cite Naipaul here when he sums up R K Narayan’s projection of India, “Too much that is overwhelming has been left out: too much has been taken for granted” (Naipaul, 228). Valmiki, on the other hand, intends to reveal the inner agony in the sheer humanness of dalits and also tell the readers that the dalits have ended their centuries old silence imposed upon them by the caste-structured society. *Joothan* is all about putting an end to subaltern silence by advocating a
rejection of old customs and oppressive psychology that refuses to treat dalits as humans:

Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as humans. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and throw them away. (2)

The agony and plight of dalits has evoked reactions and responses among writers from all over the globe. Initially, there were not many authors who portrayed the dalits. The publishing industry was not receptive either. The Untouchable by Mulk Raj Anand depicting dirt, squalor, latrines and a deplorable sweeper basti provoked a lot of criticism and controversy and the novel was rejected by 19 publishers. It required E. M. Forster’s introduction to make it acceptable to any publisher. And it was James Freeman who provided centre stage to an Indian untouchable in his work, Untouchable: An Indian Life History. The untouchable who is the focus of Freeman’s study is in a way ‘representative’ of all untouchables and the story of his life reveals what it means to live a life in the Indian caste-ridden society.

Mulk Raj Anand’s first novel, Untouchable, poignantly describes the protagonist Bakha’s daylong odyssey through social wrongs and his mental conflicts caused by his encounters with caste Hindus. Bakha’s chambra fraternity lives in great pain and frustration facing marginalisation imposed by the society, trying to acquire some sort of identity. Bakha who is denied education dreams of fulfilling his fundamental needs while doing his morning and evening rounds of regimental latrines. His work (cleaning of human waste) prevents him from gaining respect in society. There are many solutions proposed in the novel like Christ, Gandhi, Marx and Machine, out of which the last of these (machine – the
flush system) is believed to offer some help to the pathetic life of the Untouchables. It is very revolutionary on Anand’s part to make Bakha the central character in the 1930s when the Untouchables hardly found any mention in mainstream literature. He projected untouchability as a national problem, something with which Mahatma Gandhi also agreed:

Untouchability, as at present practiced, is the greatest blot on Hinduism. It is (with apologies to Sanatanists) against the Shastras. It is against the fundamental principals of humanity. It is against the dictates of the reason that a man should, by mere reason of birth, be forever regarded as an Untouchable.

The Hindu references have come to the conclusion that it has no support in the Hindu Shastras taken as a whole (Gandhi, Harijan, 2 February 1933.)

Bakha, who lived his entire life in sheer despair and desperation, realizes once again at the end of his life that he is nothing more than a small part of population. A Hindu merchant pours water over the coin Bakha had placed at a designated spot, a packet of cigarettes is thrown at him and the encounter on the street ends in a traumatic episode. A caste Hindu slaps Bakha for polluting him, “Dirty dog! Son of a bitch”. Bakha’s deep agony is thus described: “Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!” (20).

Anand did not stop with Untouchable, when he saw the disease of caste discrimination ailing Indian society well after independence, he burst out with The Road and expressed his serious concerns:

Well, it was a kind of shock to me when I went to live in Haryana, twenty miles from Delhi, in the human empire of Jawaharlal Nehru, to find out that the outcasts not only in south India but in the mixed north were still confined to the
limbo of oblivion. There was something tragic-comic to me in the fact that the caste Hindu would not touch the stones quarried by the Untouchables to make the road because the stones had been touched by the Untouchables. I mentioned to the great Nehru. He did not believe me. He was quite angry at my mentioning this awkward fact. I said I would prove it to him in the “enchanted manner” (the Cowasjee, 13).

In sum, the caste system has an all-pervading influence on Indian society. The society that U R Anantha Murthy presents in his novels is influenced by the caste system but this important insight has not received any critical attention so far. There is a fundamental chasm between dalit and non-dalit authors and activists in their ways of analysis of different facets of our society and history. All dalit authors are trying to point towards a systematic design behind the total absence of the dalit perspective in mainstream literature and by the absolute necessity of bringing these points of views into operation with the dominating Hindu narratives of Indian history, society, nationalism and colonialism.