



**SOCIO – HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE IN BHABANI BHATTACHARYA’S *SO MANY HUNGERS!***

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**ABSTRACT**

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s novel *So Many Hungers!* is the story of the people of Indian society and their crisis during the crucial Bengal famine of 1943. Quit India movement and Gandhian ideology have been clearly depicted, throughout the story, by the novelist. The idea of transforming as a freedom fighter from a normal citizen is described through various characters in this novel. It was the story of victims and the depiction of their ineffable sufferings and how they tackle the situation. This article analyses, the novel’s sociological and historical background during the famine. It also highlights how Bhattacharya displayed the participation of Indians in the freedom movement and how they struggled for the freedom of nation. The novelist also tried to exhibit the contribution of female characters and how they involved themselves in participating national movements. Simultaneously how they played multiple roles, such as taking care of their own family as well as put an effort for being a social activist.

**Key words:** Indian society, Crisis, Bengal famine, Quit India movement, History, transformation.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is a great social realist and national activist of the post- Independent Indian society. He brings out many of the social evils in the Indian

society and has written numerous novels by using human agony as a central theme. In order to display the social evils, he has carved many characters and has shown the

Indianness, which is deeply rooted among Indian people, to the readers. Bhattacharya analyses the theme of pain and predicament of the common peasants those who live in India during the partition, in all his novels. *So Many Hungers!* is the first novel written by Bhabani Bhattacharya, published in October 1947. Since India got freedom even after so many sacrifices of the national leaders, the contemporary society is awaiting to inhale the free air and wants to enjoy every moment of life as well as ready to rebuild the nation once again. Regarding the theme of the novel G.P. Sarma states: “Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers* is not only the last political novel about the freedom struggle of this period (the early forties) but also one of the best of the category” (227).

This novel tries to exhibit the people’s hunger for food and hunger for freedom. So here hunger plays a vital role and become a central theme of the novel. The novelist gives clear report about dual events like Bengal famine of 1943 and the Quit India Movement of 1942. Between the two themes of freedom and hunger, the theme of hunger dominates the other and the novel itself depicts the causes as well as effect of hungers in this novel. But when we closely analyse the novel, it clearly exposes

that the writer tries to justify the title, *So Many Hungers!* because we can find many hungers like hunger for food, hunger for affection, hunger for love, hunger for lust, hunger for money, hunger for freedom, hunger for dignity, hunger for self-respect throughout this novel. This novel is set against the background of the Quit India Movement and the Bengal famine of 1943.

As a creative writer, Bhattacharya clearly defines the situation of Indian life and cruelties and beastly acts of the anti-social and anti- democratic forces of contemporary India. He lists out many of the social and political conditions of the Indian society in this novel. Administrators show their cruel face to the people. Prof A.P. Mehta also explains the situation as: “The rural poverty which was emphasized by the government while presenting their First Five Year Plan has thrown up a new class of novel” (248). As there was no source to live in their own mother land, many people are forced to migrate to Calcutta. This heart breaking situation proves the cold condition of the government. The following lines describe the vicious and corrupted situation of Bengal economy. “Corruption had grown like an epidemic and money had become a mad- hunger. Never in the land’s history had the process that made the rich richer, the

poor, poorer, gained such ruthless intensity”.  
(172)

It contains two major plots. Right from the beginning to end the whole story revolves around the two families. The novelist introduces two protagonists and they lead the story to next level. The first plot introduces Samarendra Basu and his family and one among them is a young and energetic Rahoul, who plays the principal character. On the other side a peasant family and young girl Kajoli, also plays a principal role. Through these characters, the novelist examines the crucial face of famine and freedom movement. There is another character that combines the two major characters and connects two plots, real head of Basu's family and namely head of the peasant family, none other than Devesh Basu, respectively called as Devata by the peasants of Baruni village. Having dissatisfaction with the luxurious life in the city, with his son and grandsons, he leaves the village to lead a simple life with the family of Kajoli and the villagers at Baruni. Devata is a man who motivates both major characters in the novel, Rahoul and Kajoli to make their own right path towards national movement. K.R.Chandrasekaran has criticized about the two plots and the central characters of the novel:

Rahoul's story is a representation in miniature of the struggle for freedom. The sad Tale of Kajoli is likewise a pathetic record of what happened to more than two million Men and women who became victims of a famine, which was not an act of God, but which was brought about by the rapacity and selfishness of profiteers and indifference of an alien government.  
(11)

The story interconnects the two characters; one of them is Dr.Rahoul, Samarendra Basu's first son, an astro physicist in Calcutta University. While he was studying D.Sc degree in Cambridge he had thought to participate in the independence movement under the influence of his grandfather Devesh Basu. This is the right turning point, where the life journey of the hero Rahoul changed from that of students to freedom fighter on Gandhian path. In the opening scene Rahoul is introduced as a Cambridge student, busy in research and teaching his wards. But everything comes to an end, when he comes to know that the war is gradually spreading to Bengal and ruined many of common men's life. On the other side he is confident that every death would be a seed and that

upbringing a new life to the country. As he is an optimistic person, he is also ready to pour his contribution for getting freedom to the nation. With hope and aspiration, the protagonist, Rahoul starts his journey as a freedom fighter to bring new change and progress to the life of common people. In his every meeting with Devata, he learns many things particularly the pathetic condition of the landless Kisans of Baruni village, which represents the life style of other Indian villages.

Facts never tell much unless they are seen in terms of human experience. On his petty income the landed peasants can have just enough of his own rice to eat, no reserve for lean days. And the kisans – they must always be hungry, save for a spell of two or three months in the year, when they earn meals and a wage for field – work. (22)

Even though he is the son of a profiteer, he is ready to sacrifice his life and give support to needy people, because the man-made famine almost starts to attack Bengal. He has a younger brother named Kunal, an affectionate and cheerful kind hearted man. He also knows well about the value of morality. As a spirited adventurous

man he joins junior army office in North America and Italy. After he leaves the service as an army man to Italy, he has to lose his life, and he is killed. Through the character of Kunal and his attitude, the writer makes a deep sense of emotion and pain to the readers. Because, though minor character, he reflects the fire of the contemporary younger generation and their social responsibilities to develop the nation.

Samarendra Basu on the other side is a lawyer and acts against to nature and the ways of ordinary life. Unlike his father, he is very greedy for making money even in the war time. He has not even a tinge of patriotic feelings in him like his father. Instead, he is always ready to please colonial rulers and puts more effort to earn titles and tries to accumulate a great wealth and money. So he starts a trading company named ironically “Cheap Rice Limited” and collects rice and hoards it, then sells it at very high cost. The writer has explained this situation as in the following words; “Hungry children cried themselves to death. Streams of desperate men ventured out of their ancestral homes in search of food, hanging on to the footboard of railway trains, riding on the sun baked roofs”. (61)

He justifies such silly activities by explaining that he is only doing this for the

welfare of the family, so that he can provide his family a rich life and all comforts. But unfortunately his dreams are completely shattered, as Calcutta stock market crashes. To regain all his money and image, he resumes his work at the high court and works hard to reach his goal. In the meantime he plans to get the highest post for his son to regain all the social status and to make their life settled. But at last his dream palace breaks into pieces one by one, when he hears that his son Kunal is missing somewhere in Italy and his eldest son Rahoul is arrested for participating in the freedom movement.

Devesh Basu known as Devata is a keen follower of Gandhian principles and lives in Baruni village. He is deeply loved and celebrated by the village peasants. He indeed inspires his grandson Rahoul and guides him to follow the principles of Indian leaders. Devata stands for courage and bravery and lives an ideal life with all dignity. He thoroughly observes the situation of political and social changes created by the profiteers. Indians are forced to pay tax unnecessarily. So Devata suggests Baruni villagers to not to pay unjust tax. Since Baruni villagers are influenced by the principles of Gandhi, the spark of Quit India movement touches the villagers also.

In Baruni village, Devata is settled down in the family of Kajoli, a girl from the peasant family, a protagonist of the novel and the second plot revolves around this character. Kajoli and her family members are completely ruined by the man-made famine. S.R. Iyengar rightly states that, “The novel is an impeachment of man’s inhumanity of man” (414). Freedom struggle also breaks up all over the country. Kajoli’s father and his elder son Kanu are arrested and put in jail for participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement. In such situation, Devata takes care of Kajoli’s family, treats Kajoli as his granddaughter, Kajoli’s mother as his daughter and he himself becomes the head of the family. He spreads non-violence throughout the village. He is arrested and put in Dehra Dun jail. There he undertakes a fast unto death. This incident spreads out all over the country. Haunted by the situation, Kajoli decides to become a prostitute to escape from the need of money. Suddenly she recollects the spirited words of Devata who advises the villagers to have enough courage to face any circumstances and be strong enough to lead the life in an honest way. The powerful words given by Devata, before leaving to jail, awoke Kajoli from the shame and sufferings, and turned her into a freedom fighter.

Through the character of Kajoli, the novelist portrays the status of Indian women, how they represent the society and emerges themselves as a new woman. Rahoul represents how a patriotic Indian works hard for the freedom of the country against the colonizers. Kajoli represents the cruel background of the rural peasants of Bengal in 1943, and becomes the victim of man-made famine. As soon as they know the cause for the illness of the society is nothing but black marketers, they raise a voice against them. But still Kajoli has to lose her innocent family for the hungers of profiteers. Her husband named Kishore, is a modern, well educated, amiable young man with good nature. His various approaches, in order to bring some welfare to the down-trodden make him a famous labour leader of a cotton mill at Calcutta. But he is killed very soon in an accident, but his tragic end is unknown to Kajoli and her families.

From the starting to end, the novel reveals the mental pain of the people during the war time because of the misrule of colonizers. Throughout the novel, the novelist deals with the two plots, upper class Basu's family and the village peasant Kajoli's family. The force of hunger has not left any of the people, it ruins all the creatures. All of them are victimized by the

hand of critical situation. Bhattacharya successfully portrays all the characters as well as situation, as every character represents the agony of the contemporary society. The sacrifice of numerous women characters is established and some of them are ready to kill themselves for reducing the family burden like Kajoli's unnamed mother.

Another notable aspect of the novelist is the treatment of city life as well as village life. Through the character of Kajoli and her family, he exhibits the condition of Baruni village and the life style of the peasants. When the exploiters try to attack them, they stand together and show their unity. Though Devata has come from city, they welcome and celebrate him as a leader. His inspirational speech and Gandhian ideology spread throughout the village. They are ready to fight against the Britishers, using the tool of non-violence. On the other side through the characterization of Basu's family Bhattacharya depicts the city life. Bhatnagar criticises the situation as: "Bhattacharya's denunciation of exploitation – political, caste based or economic – is rendered in human terms and not ideological terms. This novel presents a moving spectacle of

persons reeling under economic and political depredation". (Bhatnagar 161)

The conversation between Rahoul and his wife Monju reveals the situation of the city during the war and it clearly exhibits the relationship between men and women. Women can get all the freedom to talk, share their ideas and can wear any kind of fashionable dress, if they want. The notion of social status and condition alone creates a gap between man and man. Analysing these real events and ideas, taken from his contemporary society and his vivid description of the situation of Bengal during famine and war Bhattacharya attracts the mind of the readers. As a creator and social activist he lists out all the ills of the society, and picturizes the background of Bengal and its political issues and also gives the solution to rebuild the nation back. The novel *So Many Hungers!* unfolds the contemporary Indian's social problems. A notable feature of this novel is its vivid description of the suffering of the age and exhibits the crucial face of exploiters and hoarders. Thus it has proven that the whole book deals with the theme of socio- political and historical condition in India.

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