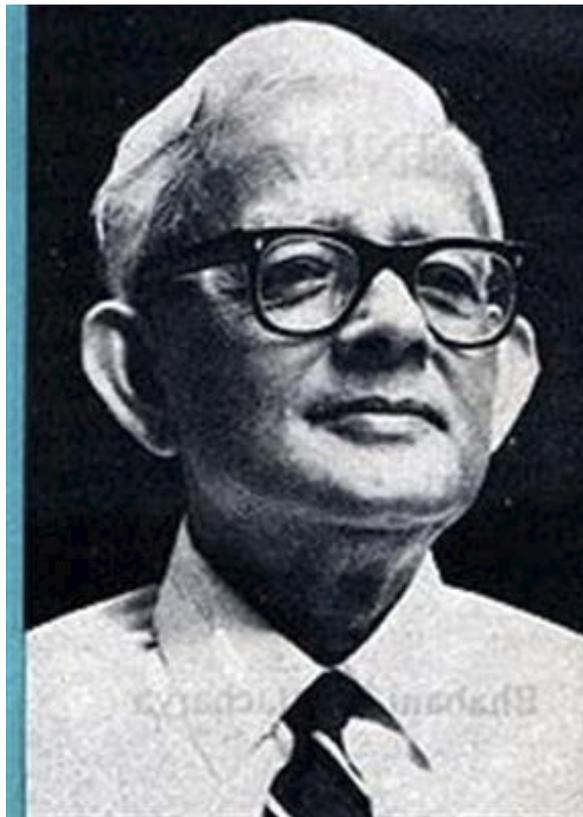


CHAPTER – III
THE NOVELS OF
BHABANI BHATTACHARYA



(1906-1989)

“...while men died of hunger, wealth grew, and while kindness dried up religion was more in demand. It was only the outward form of religion, the shell of ritual empty within”

He Who Rides a Tiger

CHAPTER – III

THE NOVELS OF BHABANI BHATTACHARYA

Being a novelist with a social purpose, Bhattacharya has depicted the social, economic and political changes in India on the background of the contemporary historical events and social conditions. The chapter proposes to examine his three novels namely, *So Many Hungers!* (1947) , *He Who Rides a Tiger*(1952) and *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960) in which poverty, hunger and exploitation are the major themes.

So Many Hungers !

Bhabani Bhattacharya's first novel *So Many Hungers!* (1947) deals with poverty, hunger and exploitation of the peasants in the man-made famine of Bengal during the Second World War. The exclamatory mark with which the title ends denotes the writer's bewilderment at the multiplicity of hunger. B. Syamala Rao in *Bhabani Bhattacharya* says,

The title of the novel, *So many Hungers!* is amply justified. There are indeed many hungers. - hunger for food, hunger for affection, hunger for love, hunger for lust, hunger for money, hunger for sacrifice and hunger for the general welfare of all. (Rao 46)

Indian peasants are always under the shadow of either a famine or a flood. Most of them are always the victims of natural calamities. They accept poverty and hunger as their destiny. But this story deals with the hunger which is an outcome of a man- made famine. What

K.K Sharma says about this in *Bhabani Bhattacharya : His Vision and Themes* is noteworthy:

A unique quality of this novel is that it portrays realistically the agony of the age it depicts, a quality which perhaps no other novel of this category published still 1947. (Sharma 227)

Bhattacharya deals with the specific period of famine, when the poor farmers were fooled by the opportunists into selling all their grain for a paltry price and were finally reduced to hunger. Bhattacharya traces their movement to the city of Calcutta in search of food and their degradation as well as the tragic deaths of millions of men. He portrays a whole lot of exploiters who never hesitate to use the vulnerability of its victims for selfish gains.

The story moves around two families. The urban family of Samarendra Basu in Calcutta consists of his wife, two sons Rahoul and Kunal, Rahoul's wife Manju and father Devesh or Devata. The other, a peasant family from a small village Jharana, consisting of Mother, her husband, her daughter Kajoli, two sons and the son-in-law Kishore. These two families make the two strands of the plot. All the poor are depicted as the exploited ones but not all the rich are the exploiters. While only one member of the rich family is responsible for the exploitation of the poor, the other members on the contrary extend their helping hand to the poor. The stories of these two families run parallel till the end of the novel.

Samarendra, who is a lawyer by profession, looks at the war as an opportunity to make a fortune. He forms a trading company with the ironic name 'Cheap Rice, Limited'. He realizes that if he could corner even a fraction of Bengal's rice yield, he would be a millionaire. His younger son Kunal, who loves thrill, joins the British

Army. The elder son Rahoul who follows the footsteps of his grandfather Devesh looks at the war as a threat to democracy. Samarendra's wife realizes that scarcity of food and essential commodities will make the life of the common people miserable.

Devesh Basu, whom the villagers of Baruni call 'Devata', inspires them to participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement. The police arrest Devata and Kajoli's father. The villagers respond with anger and set the post office on fire. The government imposes a collective fine upon the entire village for the arson. The villagers set the rice grains to pay the fine. A number of villages at the coastal area are taken into possession by the British army. The displaced ones rush to Calcutta to earn their living.

The condition in the countryside worsens day by day. The rice hunger swells with the time. The stock of cattle fodder gets exhausted. The people start feeding themselves on the fish, crabs and green tree figs. The traders from the cities start appearing at the doors of the villagers to sell rice in exchange of the household utensils and cattle. The brothel agents from the city lure the poor peasants by telling them how they can get rich by sending their young daughters to the city.

When the scarcity of food becomes unbearable, Kajoli's family too leaves for Calcutta. They feed themselves with green figs and roots during their journey on foot. One night Kajoli is raped by a soldier in the meadows. Kajoli, who is pregnant, is seriously hurt. The soldier however later on feels guilty and takes Kajoli and her family to Calcutta in an ambulance and admits her in a hospital.

A number of relief centers are opened in Calcutta to help the destitutes from the countryside. Rahoul works in one of such centers. Kajoli's mother and brother survive for the next few days on the free

kitchens run by the relief centers. After a few weeks Kajoli is discharged from the hospital. The mother takes her to the alley where they live. Kajoli feels guilty for making her mother to live in such a miserable condition. A betel leaf seller woman suggests Kajoli an easy way of making money. Kajoli understands the nature of the woman and decides to keep herself away from her. But after a few days, in order to save her family from hunger, she decides to accept the offer. She feels that her body is already defiled so it does not make any difference if it gets defiled again and again. She accepts the advance from the agent and keeps the money inside the sacking on the bed under her mother's head.

The mother decides to commit suicide to remove her burden from her children. When she wakes up, she takes off her sari and wraps herself with the sacking under her head and goes to the bridge over the river Ganga to commit suicide. Kajoli leaves the house to meet the brothel agent. On her way she hears a newspaper boy shouting that an old freedom fighter Devesh Basu is on hunger strike in the prison. Kajoli remembers his words "Do not betray yourself. The supreme test has come. Be strong. Be true. Be deathless" (195). Kajoli repents with anguish for succumbing to the crisis so cheaply. Now she decides to earn money with honest means. She gives a smack on the brothel agent's face and enters the newspaper office to find a job. Samarendra receives the news that his son Kunal Basu is missing from the war front and Rahoul is arrested by the police for the anti-government activities. He understands that the British Empire has claimed both his sons. His hunger for money and fame devastates his family.

'Hunger' is the central character of this novel. If there is any protagonist, it is hunger. All the human characters are peripheral. They represent different types of hungers. At the inner periphery there

are three characters: Kajoli, her mother and her brother Onu. They are victims of hunger for food. At the outer periphery we have Samarendra, his elder son Rahoul, younger son Kunal and Rahoul's wife Manju, Samarendra's father 'Devesh, Kajoli's father and brother, the soldier and the black marketeer Abalbandhu. Samarendra is a victim of hunger for money. Rahoul is a victim of so many hungers - hunger for research, hunger for freedom, and hunger for happier life of common man. Kunal has a hunger for adventures. Manju is hungry for her sweet home. Devesh Basu and Kajoli's father and brother have hunger for the freedom. The soldier is a prey to sex. Abalbandhu is not a victim of hunger for money but he makes others victim of his hunger for money.

Basically a Barrister at the bar of the High Court, Samarendra jumps into the share market to satisfy his hunger for money. The failure in the share market makes him think about his own business. His obsession with money makes him a black-marketeer. He becomes an anti-social culprit who performs the immoral act of hoarding food grain. Because of him, men, women and children all over Bengal suffer from hunger. Poor helpless innocent people die lingering, painful deaths.

The son of a freedom fighter turns into a blackmarketeer. Samarendra's present seems to be an inevitable outcome of his past which is marked by poverty. His disgust for the poverty and hunger for money are the result of his impoverished childhood. His childhood memories of humiliation and insecurity haunt him. He thinks that his sons should never face the ugly sordidness of poverty. "And it was all for his sons' sake - with wealth heaped at his feet, his own personal needs were still little more than a daily bowl of rice, as they had been in all those years when poverty had held him chained like a

slave”(31). Though his son, Rahoul feels that he is an 'insensitive man', Samarendra evokes our pity because of his concern for his family. A well known critic Balam Gupta says that his primary fault is that he refuses to enlarge the orbit of his concern and sympathy. He does not care about the world.

Poverty makes him practical minded. It makes him shrewd and worldly wise. Though he becomes a blackmarketeer, he feels sorry for it. He consoles himself with the logic that if he does not do that someone else will do it. He does not lose his humanity. To overcome the guilt he donates money to the free kitchen organized by his son and daughter-in-law for the hungry destitutes.

Though he earns name and fame through the exploitation of the poor, he never sleeps well. At the end of the story he is left in the state of bewilderment and disillusionment. Balam Gupta in *Indian English Literature* rightly observes, “But all his achievements come to naught and leave a bitter taste in his mouth” (Gupta 124). In the beginning he evokes our anger as a blind follower of the British Empire and an exploiter of the poor people, but in the end we feel sympathy for him for his being a human being and not an angel by birth.

Rahoul does not follow the footsteps of his father. As an idealist he feels pity and sympathy for the poor. He understands that any kind of exploitation is bad. He feels that he should take an active part in the World War against the Nazi dictator and the fascist aggression. But he feels that research in Science is his true field of work. “He had his own separate hunger. His own hunger was his true concern” (108). The horrors of the World War, cruelties of the British government, sufferings of the innocent rural people due to the man-made famine and the indifference of the Indian rich towards the

hungry destitutes create a background to the transformation of a calm scientist into a social rebel. He understands "...in his spirit the hungers of his people. And they were his hunger too" (108).

He decides to work for the victims of hunger. The sight of the food reminds him of thousands of destitutes dying of hunger. An intense sadness fills his eyes with tears and the desperate yell for the food by the hungry destitutes makes him sick. The food sticks to his throat like glue. When a destitute woman dies of throes in labour in his house, he gets so angry with the British government that he shouts "They have killed one more of our men folk. They shall pay - pay hard for everything"(168). At this moment he realizes his true hunger. Manju, his wife, sees 'her husband's true spirit, his hunger for a happier life for the common man' (168).

Devesh Basu, Devata of the village rightly introduces Kajoli as "a well-bred peasant girl with legacy of manners as old as India" (37). Like any other rustic girl her dreams are simple. She dreams about her happy married life. She marries a boy from the city, honouring the wish of her father. She enjoys a short period of her married life. She becomes a victim of poverty, hunger and exploitation. The dream of her married life shatters. She loses her husband in a brutal attack of the railway police. Onslaught of war and manmade scarcity of food make her homeless and turns her into a miserable destitute. Her pregnancy makes her life more gruesome. But even in dire poverty and hunger she remains a symbol of endurance. The virtuous girl cannot save her chastity in a sex assault by a sex hungry soldier for two reasons: firstly, as she is too weak to fight or run and secondly, as she feels guilty of forgetting her mother and brother. When a soldier offers her bread she forgets her mother and brother and swallows the bread. When she realizes her mistake she is so ashamed of herself that

in order to get some more bread for her mother and brother she surrenders to the soldier's hunger for sex. In the brutal rape she gets seriously hurt and loses her child.

Towards the end of the story she decides to sell herself for the sake of her mother and brother. She feels that the body once defiled is defiled; its purity cannot be restored. At least she can save her family and send them back to the village.

Kajoli had made her grim decision. She would sell the last thing she owned - herself. Mother was dying. She ailed, and could not eat the poor fare her son and daughter provided, begging on streets and picking in the garbage. (191)

The courage to act arises from her inner self and shows a better picture - if not the best - of her future. She regains her strength to fight against the greed and exploitation and gives a blow in the face of the betel seller woman, a brothel agent. Her decision symbolizes her conquest over her inner conflict. Her contemptuous smacking slap symbolizes her rebuff to the exploitation. K.R. Chandrasekharan in *Bhabani Bhattacharya* says,

This is Kajoli's exit from the story; ... It is clear that she has grown to her full moral stature and chosen her path, which, one may safely surmise, is the path of dignity and self respect. Sorrow and suffering have not destroyed her spirit which remains unconquered and unconquerable. (Chandrasekharan 21)

Devesh Basu, another significant character not only speaks like Gandhi but also behaves like him. When the police arrest him in the village, the villagers turn violent and try to protest. He stops them by making them aware of the principle of ahimsa. He says, "Friends and

comrades do not betray the flag. Do not betray yourselves. There is violence in your thoughts that is evil enough. Do not make it worse by violence in action...Be strong. Be true. Be deathless”(72). Even at the age of seventy, he goes on hunger strike in the prison against the exploitation by the rulers, “Wielding his body's hunger like a sword strong as ever and true and deathless” (195).

Through Devesh Basu Bhattacharya shows that poverty, hunger and exploitation cannot degrade or debase the true human spirit. Sufferings can take them away from the moral values but only temporarily. There is at least one incident in everybody's life, save Abalbandhu's, where they do not fail to show the noble human values. What Devata says about the villagers is applicable to most of the Indians. “They are good people. Centuries of hardship and strain have not destroyed their faith in human values” (24).

A number of characters symbolize so many hungers but the situation predominates in the novel and dwarfs all the characters. Most of the critics often mention that Bhattacharya's themes are entirely related to contemporary events and social realities. He writes on Indian problems but with a universal appeal. The main objective of his writing is to present the Indian scenario with a view to change it. He is not only a social realist but a writer preoccupied with human predicament.

Despite the poverty which is prevalent everywhere, the richness of the minds of the poor never fails anywhere. Their richness knows no barriers of caste, colour and country and appears to be the main source of *So Many Hungers!* On the background of three historical events before Indian independence - ‘the Second World War’, ‘Quit India Movement’ and ‘the man-made famine of Bengal’, the human spirit is tasted on the anvil of three social problems namely poverty,

hunger and exploitation, and gets purified. He uses the word 'Hunger' as a refrain throughout the novel and expresses his own views about it in different places. Apart from the hunger for food and sex, he also talks about other hungers through the characters of Kajoli and Kishore.

M.K. Naik very accurately enumerates the various types of hunger embodied in *So Many Hungers!*

The 'So Many Hungers' of the title are those for political freedom (in the case of India); for imperial expansion (in the case of the axis powers); for money (in the case of the capitalists who create artificial food scarcity by hoarding rice), for food (in the case of the starved Bengali poor); for sex (in the particular case of sex starved soldier who rapes the destitute rustic girl and in general, of those who frequent the Calcutta brothels, now unusually well stocked with needy starvelings); for human dignity and self respect (in the case of Kajoli, who rejects the brothel) and hunger as a spiritual weapon employed by the freedom fighters, who go on a hunger strike in jail, 'Devata' even undertaking a fast unto death. Of these several hungers, the novelist has succeeded in dealing with hunger for food, and the scenes depicting the havoc wrought by the famine among the rural poor in Bengal constitute some of the finest examples of social realism in Indian English fiction. (Naik 213-214)

Bhatttacharya blames the British for the exploitation which results in poverty and hunger. "Why were these innocent people doomed to hunger and death, while the Army had rice and wheat to squander? Who but the peasants had created the food grains - not the colonel, not the Brigadier, not the Jungi Lat...." (149).

The Indian traders from the cities nearby come to help the British with perfect planning. They know exactly when to go to their doors with the rice and buy their cattle and commodities. They are shrewd like jackals. They are cunning enough to draw everyone in their trap. “Finally, Human endurance ebbed. Hungry children cried themselves to death. Streams of desperate men ventured out of their ancestral homes in search of food” (111). Hunger uproots millions of peasants from their soil. The exploitation compels them to leave their birth places. Chandrasekharan’s observation in *Bhabani Bhattacharya* in this regard is worth noting,

So Many Hungers! is a severe indictment both of the foreign government for its apathy and neglect and of unprincipled Indians who exploit the situation for their own benefit and who are no better than the vultures and jackals ‘waiting for the flesh that dies’ and sometimes not even waiting till it dies. The novelist’s righteous indignation, his sincerity and his compassion are in evidence all through the novel. It undoubtedly presents an artistic success (Chandrasekharan 32).

While analyzing various reasons of hunger he throws light on migration of villagers to the big cities. This has been the problem in India till today. Most of the rural people rush to the big cities in order to get job. They blindly believe that the poor and the needy are cared for in the city. Those who want to work can get work. One can earn his living through honest means. There is enough food and money. Here Bhattacharya wants to show that hunger is same in both places. The people who leave their birth places find it impossible to settle in the city. The same vultures and jackals of the countryside who feed themselves on the miseries of the people exist in the city. Hunger makes the destitutes dig the roots and snatch the green figs of trees in

the countryside. Hunger makes the destitutes dig out the garbage cans for peels and stalks and rotten vegetables in the city. In the countryside they catch the fish and crabs to eat, in the city they are compelled to catch the rats to survive. In the countryside they search their food through jungles and meadows. The garbage cans become their food bowls in the city.

The terrible plight of the homeless migrant peasants aggravates. Due to the scarcity of food grain, they have to survive on the green figs and the roots but that too are exhausted soon as the vast starving masses that had gone ahead consume them. The terrible words of the woman from Calcutta brothel comes true “Roots? In a month there will be no roots left anywhere in Bengal : trees will be shorn of leaves, even the grass of the fields gone” (135). A large number of peasants fail to survive. One can find a number of dead bodies everywhere:

corpses lay by the road, huddling together. Picked to the bone; only the hair uneaten.... A family group had sunk into sleep and beyond the sleep was...vultures.Vulture-eaten corpses kept them (Kajoli's family) company, now revealed by the roadside, now some way apart in the shade of trees and screens of brushwood, always huddling together. (137)

Hunger makes them so weak that they even fail to protect themselves from the wild animals. “A woman lay stretched by the tree trunk, goaning, while a jackal crouched and ate her body. The jackal saw Kajoli, grunted and slunk off unhurried”(140). Those who survive rush to the great city with the belief that they will definitely get food, shelter and honest means of earning. Kajoli's mother reflects “...the poor and needy were cared for in the wonder city. And why not? The city had money to spare and jingle. The people had great

kindness in their hearts” (152). The mother’s reflection represents the thoughts of all the destitutes who come to Calcutta. “Wave after wave of hunger stricken masses surging from the countryside. A great many were in no fit state to consume solid food. They ate and died”(153).

With the hungry destitutes, hunger spreads over the city of Calcutta like an epidemic. The hungry destitutes roam throughout the city to beg for food. They gather around free kitchens with earthen pans or half-shells of coconut. Through Rahoul’s reflections Bhattacharya shows how hunger works like a slow poison. The plight of a hungry destitute described by Rahoul represents the plight of all the migrant destitutes:

Strange how much a human body could go through before life left at last. The first few days the man suffered most. He was mad with hunger. Then he grew listless. He laid himself down. His mouth was too tired for food and he only wanted to left alone. His eyes died. He wasted to a skeleton, using up whatever shreds of flesh he had anywhere on his body. (153, 154)

Rahoul recalls an incident of an old man who walks a long way and crosses mother Ganges and approaches a free kitchen but cannot eat even a morsel,

Fate, ironic, denied him his last mouthful of rice. As food came into sight, ready to be served; the man shuddered with an excitement that he could not hold. Food was being handed out. His turn soon.... As he sat watching, the bleary eyes bulged with fearsome desire, a groan of agony broke from the thin throat, and the man slumped on his side, dead”(154).

Rahoul sees a destitute mother lay on her side on the railway platform, “her legs drawn up, eyes closed, a baby at her breast. The woman lay still, but the baby moved its lips faintly as it suckled. The mother was dead”(154). Through a number of such incidents, Bhattacharya arouses our pity for the hungry destitutes and anger for the exploiters responsible for the peasants’ miseries.

Bhattacharya is criticized for the abundant use of the incidents of poverty and hunger. As Paul Verghese, in his discussion of the novel considers that it is an exaggerated and cheap portrayal of the famine. However, another critic Chandrasekharan opposes by saying this:

The criticism is not valid because most of the situations depicted in the novel are true to life in the country even at normal times not to speak of a time of unusual hardship. Men without shelter, clothes and food are no new phenomenon in our land; it can still be seen on the pavements of our proud cities including the capital. Beggars hunting for food in garbage bins are a common sight... There is no incident in the novel which can be said to be impossible and we have the novelist’s word for it that the story is based on factual reports. (Chandraseharan 32)

Bhattacharya evokes fear in our mind about the inner degradation of the village destitutes. As hunger bit harder, fine feelings start disappearing. Rahoul finds news papers loaded with the news of the deaths of the hungry destitutes and the pictures of ragged destitues. In one of the pictures “A woman sat on the pavement eating from a bowl while her famished child sat by and gazed”(181). One of the correspondent reports

“A destitute mother who could not feed her three children tried to drown them in the Ganges” (181). A story appears in the paper, “A starving mother with a child at her breast was given food at a kitchen. While she ate, the child died in her lap. But the mother ate on. She finished her meal and then left the kitchen with her dead child”(181). There was news that “a destitute woman with three children, after a days hard effort, collected some handfuls of rice. At sunset, she lighted a fire, a hungry man snatched away the grain and fled” (181). The scenes such as children with distended bellies fighting with mangy and famished dogs for scraps of garbage, emaciated and bony men scooping out the chewed food from others mouths and putting that into their own or hunger stricken girls being sold or raped, are common. There is one more striking incident in which a woman is found carrying a dead child from door to door, blackmailing charity,

When Kajoli and her mother find a woman alive being eaten by the jackal they are stunned. The mother drips the water into the mouth of the dying woman. She feels sorry for her death, but as soon as she sees a jackfruit near the dead woman she gets excited. “....even in her wretchedness in the presence of the mutilated corpse the mother felt her heart grow faint with joy.... Kajoli was too sensitive still. She will be sickened at eating the jack fruit; but she would eat it all the same”(141).

When Kajoli gets a piece of bread from a soldier she forgets her mother and brother and ,

Instantly she dug her teeth into the lump, swallowing swiftly, not chewing, not lingering for the feel of bread on her tongue, swallowing hard... In a minute the bread was all gone, and then

the realization burst upon her that she had eaten all; nothing was left for her brother, her mother nothing. Tears broke in her eyes, pouring down her cheeks.(144)

Though there appear a lot of such instances of degradation, quite a few positive sacrificial, noble incidents, push negative elements into the background and let optimism enter. Even the same destitutes who are indulged in the evil activities perform the noble acts and make us believe in humanity.

The peasants love their cattle more than anything else. They would starve and die and yet not touch the rice in exchange of cattle. They do not treat their cattle as animals but as their family members. Kajoli's mother gives away her cow as a mark of humanity. When she finds a fisherman's wife burying her child alive she not only scolds but also strikes the woman across the face. The woman cries "Oh, Mother, why are you so cruel to my child? What has he done to you? Why won't you let him sleep in peace! In my arms he only knows pain; he dies slowly, slowly"(123). The mother is first bewildered but later on understands her misery. She gives her, her cow for her better future. She also offers her the rice she has saved for her children. The mother thus becomes the symbol of supreme sacrifice.

A group of destitutes pauses near a cook shop. They keep on gazing at the eatables behind the glass. Some of the young among them get excited and express their wish to break the glass and eat the things inside. An old man in the group speaks quietly, "Chhi! my sons, chhi! Are you men or thieves? How can you take by force what is not yours? Have you no true principles of living? Are you wild beasts?" (107).

The old man not only advises but also offers bread to one of the

young destitutes:

“My son, I have saved a morsel from yesterday. Eat!”
And out of a fold of his loin-cloth he produces a piece of coarse bread.

“Eat, my son”

Two other hoary -headed men hobbled up and they too produce stale pieces of food from their loin-clothes saying, “Eat my son.” (107)

The old destitutes prevent the young destitutes from committing an evil deed by offering their provision for the next one or two days. They express their gratitude towards God for saving the children from the evil in them. The destitutes and dogs often fight for possession of the rich city’s ten thousand rubbish heaps, in which craps of rotten food lay buried. Once Onu finds a jam tin in a heap but a dog comes snarling and Onu drops it and steps back. A bigger boy watches it and fights the dog and wins the jam-tin. The tin won by him is not less than treasure but he admits that it is the finding of the small boy so he offers him one side of the tin. He says “Lick this side; the other side belongs to my mouth. Lick” (171).

Another incident simultaneously exhibits the humanitarian zeal of an Indian peasant girl and the brutality of the British white soldiers. While going past the military encampment Rahoul sees a group of white soldiers around a young destitute girl sitting under a lamp post:

A soldier dropped a rupee into the begging bowl, which showed a few other silver coins... She stood erect and lifted her face starward... stripping the ragged garment from her breast. So she stood bare, the hooded street light full upon her, a bronze image with eyes reading starward... Another rupee

clinked into bowl the girl rose once more and bared herself...
(84)

The scene arouses our pity for the girl but what follows makes us feel proud of her. The destitute girl picks up the bowl and buys a lot of coarse bread at a cheap eating shed. With the package of bread, she enters the mean alleyway which is full of destitutes. "The destitutes sat up, faces eager and joyous, and they cried thinly. "The mother!" she is back, the mother" the words tossed about.... she held the basket in the crook of one arm and started to give away the bread" (185).

Rahoul who watches the activities is amazed with the peasant girl's princely act, and ,” walking out of the lane, he felt as though he had glimpsed the sanctity of human spirit, and was dazzled by too much richness and beauty”(186). There are a lot of such noble acts of the destitutes which strengthen our belief in the human spirit. Even the soldier who rapes a hungry destitute for his hunger of sex has an ethical conscience. He feels sorry for his wrong doing and repents himself for it. To overcome his guilt he tries his level best to save her life. The soldier who himself is a son of a peasant feels sorry for the destitute girl and is ashamed of himself.

We feel more sympathetic towards all the peasant destitutes, when we come across the instances of perverse acts by the exploiters like Abalbandhu and his class. Bhattacharaya compares them with vultures and jackals. But the narration of Abalbandhu about his imaginary friend who enjoys the helplessness of a destitute girl in a brothel illustrates that they are not comparable even to animals, they are the monsters.

The brothel business flourishes in the war period. The young daughters from hungry destitute peasant families are bought by the

brothel agents who move around the country-side like vultures and talk to the peasant families like jackals. Most of the poor villagers allow themselves to be trapped. Very few like Kajoli's mother do not fall prey to their tricks. Abalbandhu says that no other investment is as good as the investment in the brothel, in money market. "Moneyed people have liking for the skinny girls from the countryside" (176), and brothel agent's reflection about pregnant Kajoli, that city people will prefer her as a change show the cynical minds of the rich class. When the fingers of the hungry destitutes dig the rubbish tins of the great city, money goes pouring like water through the fingers of the rich.

Abalbandhu and his class are free of social conscience. But they are known to be men of charity. They look at brothel business as an act of charity. Abalbandhu says that by paying the destitute girls they save them from the deaths of hunger. He feels proud of being 'a controller of brothels' or 'controller of social sickness'. They look at brothels as a lucrative business. They treat the girls like animals who are to be taken to the butcher. Samarendra, who belongs to the class of exploiters, gets so angry and sick with the shameless narration by Abalbandhu that he feels like striking the shameless creature across the mouth. Abalbandhu's justification of his shameless acts shows the cynical mind of Abalbandhu and his type. Very few rich people like Rahoul practise real charity. By donating free Kitchen, a few like Samarendra try to overcome the guilt of their evil acts. People like Abalbandhu, who are entirely free of social conscience, are known as men of charity. By displaying the so called norms of the social prestige, Bhattacharya attacks the standards of the respectable people in the society.

Bhattacharya accuses the rich of the exploitation of the poor;

however, he does not spare the poor for allowing themselves to be exploited. He feels that the rural people themselves are responsible for their exploitation. Most of them are not even aware of their exploitation as they are not only simple and pious but also illiterate and superstitious. They would fight and die over moral issues but they accept their poverty and hunger as their fate, an expiation of the sins of their past, "The peasants' hands were manacled with their antique moral tradition. The rice robbers were safe from peril because of the peasants' tradition" (108).

The villagers do not blame anyone for their poverty and hunger. Through the incident of Onu's prayer to the goddess, Bhattacharya shows the blind faith of Indian destitutes. He decides to pray the goddess so that he should get hurt by the Japanese Bomb, and hospitalized by the soldiers to get enough food to eat. Onu goes to the flower shop to buy the flowers for the goddess. The kind hearted woman of the flower shop offers him flowers free of charge, but Onu refuses them with the belief "If I do not pay, Mother, where is merit in the offering" (189). A boy who can buy rice for a family with half a rupee for at least a day or two, spends it on flowers with the firm belief that goddess will listen to his prayer.

Bhattacharya blames the poor for their superstitions but believes that their faith in the God gives them strength to fight against poverty and hunger. The chanting of their names gives them strength to survive. Their faith makes them embodiment of robust life full of energy and fearlessness. They are strengthened and not subdued by the exploitation. In one of the interviews Bhattacharya says,

Most of us are made up of some good, some evil, some virtue, some vice. The proportions vary, of course. But we are never made in proportions of Rama and Ravana, all hero and all

villain. (Gemil 304)

Bhattacharya attacks the British government for their negligence and hypocrisy. He shows his disgust towards the Allies in the war, as their activities are not actuated by high ideals. The British were fighting a global war for the four freedoms which did not include 'the freedom to be free'. He mentions the Atlantic Charter satirically which claims that they are fighting for democracy but denying the democratic rights to India. Bhattacharya condemns the British administration for its indifferent attitude towards Bengal in the economic crisis. Rahoul says, "And there was the colossus of authority cold and inhuman, to steer the stricken people through the great hunger with the aid of its fawning puppets. The administration lepers with corruption, from neck to heel" (105, 106).

He gets ironic towards British officers who see everyday, destitutes dying of hunger in the street but never making any effort to save them. But when the destitutes get hurt with the bomb they run through the stink and filth of the alley and carry the injured ones to the hospitals to show their concern for the war victims. The two incidents showing the inhumanity of the white soldiers are clearly evident of the colonial exploitation and their moral degradation. They look at the destitute girls as a source of entertainment and amusement. The novelist pens this picture ironically thus:

There was a sort of improvised booth at other corner, a canvass structure, with rows of photographs exhibited at its entrance. Every photo showed group of two-grinning alien soldier with a grey-faced wench on his knees. Soldiers went inside the booth and came out after a while, smiling with pleasure and holding a picture.... (The girls) earned two rupees a day, just for sitting gaily on the knees of an alien in khaki uniform for the brief

pose. (179)

Bhattacharya shows that they take such photographs for fun and carry them to their civilization as a memento of India. In another incident Rahoul watches a group of white soldiers around a young destitute girl sitting under a lamp post. By throwing a silver coin into her begging bowl soldiers make her show her naked body. “The soldiers would have something luscious to talk about, when they went home to America and England” (184, 185).

But Bhattacharya also makes it clear that not all the white soldiers are necessarily unkind or inhuman, as he shows a white soldier who offers Onu half a rupee out of pity.

The soldier stopped, looking down. His blue eyes grew deep with compassion. He smiled and spoke words of which the boy could make nothing and he passed a gentle hand over the little beggar’s dusty mop of hair. (187)

The impact of Gandhian philosophy can be seen reflected throughout the novel. When Rahoul expresses his wish to go to England to know the enemy well before the fight, Devata speaks like Gandhi,

Why should you fight the people of England? They are good people. The people are good everywhere. Our fight is with the rulers of England, who hold us in subjection for their narrow interests” (21, 22).

Devata thus becomes the spokesperson of Bhattacharya. Through him he presents Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence.

Devata's attempt to uplift the social life of the villagers is based upon the Gandhian concept of 'social uplift'. His stay in the village for

the benefit of the poor, illiterate villagers reminds us of Gandhi's call to 'Go back to the villages'. Devata's 'hunger strike' in the jail house at the age of seventy and more, his fast unto death makes us believe in Gandhi's principles of truth, non violence and satyagrah.

Like Gandhi, Bhattacharya believes in 'inner voice or 'self-conscience' of human beings. This inner voice helps human beings to follow the right path and keeps them away from the wrong. All the major characters of *So many Hungers!* listen to their inner voices. Rahoul listens to his inner voice and joins the 'Quit India' movement. Kajoli's mother listens to her inner voice and sacrifices her life. Kajoli, who is on the verge of her personal degradation responds to her inner voice and chooses the right path.

By exposing the evils of society Bhattacharya arouses our social conscience. By believing in the hope that the conscience of the exploiter will be awakened, he shows an impact of Gandhi and by believing in the progress of human being towards the betterment of mankind he shows an impact of Tagore on him. Bhattacharya ends his novel with a couplet of Tagore to show that there will not be easy surrender to exploitation.

The more they tighten the chains,
The more the chains loosen!

He Who Rides a Tiger

The title of the novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1952) is borrowed from the saying "He who rides the tiger cannot dismount". Kalo, the protagonist of the novel, rides the tiger of a lie to avenge himself on the society but he finds it difficult to dismount. "He rode a lie as if it were a tiger which he could not dismount lest the tiger pounce upon him and

eat him up” (85). Later he becomes one with the new role to such an extent that he feels, “When you ride a tiger you must not slip off its back lest the tiger stop and eat you, you ride on, ride on” (105).

K.K. Sharma in his book *Bhabani Bhattacharya: His Vision and Theme* interprets the title to reveal the theme of the novel thus:

The suggestive title of the novel *He who Rides a Tiger* can also be interpreted in relation to the theme of hunger. To sit and ride on the tiger’s back implies man’s quest for riding on hunger. Just as the tiger is a ferocious animal and unhesitatingly kills the man, so is hunger. Kalo and Lekha two principal characters of the novel suffer terribly on account of hunger and lose their home, place, profession, morals and goodness. Hence they decide to ride the tiger-symbolizing relentless hunger (Sharma 61).

We rarely find any incident unrelated to the theme. There are not too many characters either. The story revolves around a single character with its theme being the conflict between an individual and the society. The protagonist’s life shows three phases. The first phase describes the background of the conflict. The hero leaves the small town to escape from poverty and hunger and goes to the big city where his firm belief in law, justice and social ethics gets shattered. In the second phase the actual conflict occurs. In order to take revenge on the society, he rides on the tiger of lie. He himself becomes a part of the class of the exploiters. The final phase indicates self realization. The protagonist realizes that the tiger is no more under his control. Instead, he is under the tiger’s control. He decides to dismount it. In the climax of the story, he not only dismounts but also kills the tiger, and conquers his self.

Kalo, the blacksmith lives happily with his only daughter, Chandralekha, in a small town Jharana. He falls victim to the havoc wrought by the man-made famine in Bengal. Leaving his daughter at Jharana in charge of her aunt he leaves for Calcutta. While traveling in the train he is caught by the Police for stealing bananas and is sentenced to three months rigorous imprisonment. Biten, another prisoner, advises him to retaliate against the society.

No sooner is he released than he rushes to Calcutta. He is forced to become a pimp in a brothel to earn his living. He decides to call his daughter only after establishing his own smithy. At this juncture there comes a turning point in his life. He finds his daughter in the harlot-house protecting herself from a sexual assault of one of the customers. He saves the honour of her daughter.

The miseries of his own life and sexual exploitation of his daughter make him hostile towards the society. He decides to follow the way suggested by Biten. "...a way not simply to make a living but a way to settle accounts with them" (77). He makes Lord Shiva emerge from the earth with the technique taught by Biten. He builds a temple with the financial aid by a number of devotees. Lekha christians her father as Mangal Adhikari. A blacksmith turns into a Brahmin.

Kalo starts to perform a number of rituals in the temple to attract the devotees. He receives a tremendous response to the ritual of Shiva's milk bath. Vishwanath, the kamar, offers the milk of Shiva's bath to the destitute babies dying of hunger. Lekha convinces Kalo that an act of feeding hungry babies is far more pious than throwing it into the river.

Biten is released. He realises that Kalo has forgotten the pledge of the revenge and become a part of the social system. The friendship of Biten and Lekha turns into love. Kalo decides to offer him his

daughter and the temple business on condition of wearing the sacred thread. Biten who is by caste a Brahmin has already discarded the caste to avenge the society. He refuses to wear the thread again.

The brothel experience does not allow Lekha to accept Biten as her husband. She involves herself in the rituals of the temple. The devotees find in her the 'Mother of seven fold bliss'. But Lekha is fed up with the hypocritical role she has been playing with her father. She decides to marry Seth Motichand, a middle aged rich person in order to punish herself. She thinks "Motichand was a good rope to hang oneself with" (228).

Kalo who rides the tiger turns an exploiter to seek revenge against the exploiters. Kalo's turning an exploiter is a symbol of his attempt to protest against the exploitation. An industrious, skilled blacksmith of a small town is compelled to leave his town by the man-made famine and the plague of hunger. The man who is respected not only in his community but also in other communities, to whom the people go to settle their quarrels, gets arrested for the petty theft of bananas. His good nature and past record do not help him to be rescued. Three months rigorous imprisonment for such an ordinary crime breaks him. "Something was gone and Kalo the blacksmith of Jharana town could never be whole again" (32). The judge's question 'Why did you have to live?' upsets his faith in the value system. The oppressive awareness of low birth, poverty, hunger, and three months rigorous imprisonment for an ordinary offence turn the humble kamar into a rebel. The development of Kalo as a rebel is an outcome of a pernicious system which has to be challenged.

A small rebel was born when he sold his tools and set off for the big city. The rebel grew eyes and ears in the court and prison, with the help of B-10, gave it a mouth, a protest, out of

that protest he had acted mutinously, challenging man and god.
(122)

He puts on the sacred thread of the Brahmin "... a small town smith toiling from dawn to midnight for a fistful of rice... rode a lie as if it were a tiger..." (85). That was the way to take revenge against the society. A smith is reincarnated as a Brahmin. A convict and harlot-house procurer becomes the master of a temple, placing the hand of benediction on the bowed heads of pious folks. "So had the Wheel of *Karma* turned!" (87).

When the magistrate comes to touch his feet he feels that he has taken the revenge. He is at the top. But when he finds feelings of sadness on his daughter's face he feels defeated. Sometimes the sad face of his daughter makes him think about dismounting the tiger but suddenly he remembers the miseries of his poverty and is proud to take revenge on all the exploiters.

When he realizes that his daughter is with him only physically and far away from him mentally and spiritually, he starts feeling uneasy on the back of the tiger. The disguise of a Brahmin begins to suffocate him. He realizes that material success is futile if it does not lead to true happiness. In revenge, he does not find self-fulfillment.

When Lekha expresses her wish to marry Motichand to follow him in his battle, he understands that she is repaying him for his services to her. He understands the reason of Lekha's emotional detachment from him. He decides to dismount the tiger and kill it. He realizes that he can cheat the world but not himself. At this very moment of realization the fear of hunger as well as the fear of his future disappears. He takes off the mask in order to be simply his true self. He wins his daughter back.

Chandralekha, who unwillingly rides the tiger with her father, does not allow herself to be carried away like her father. Whenever she finds that her father is forgetting his true self, she acts as his navigator or the mentor of his conscience. A Kamar girl retains her original simplicity and contentment while playing a role of a high caste Brahmin girl. Though she accepts the role of the exploiter, she remains passive. She cannot exploit anyone. Lekha is thus a silent protester. She protests against caste and evil social system on one hand and her father's deceit and fraud on the other hand

As a woman she gets exploited by the men and women in the brothel. The picture of a woman accepting prostitution due to the poverty and hunger may be very common but Lekha is forced to enter the harlot house not out of poverty and hunger but out of her love for her father. An experience at the brothel turns her life upside down. She is shattered. "The test for life died in her" (85) She is rescued unscathed by her father but she feels contaminated with the air of the brothel. It creates hatred in her against the opposite sex.

In the 'Shiva rising' miracle she stays with her father but her inner voice forbids her father from cheating the devotees. She gets angry with her father for his hypocrisy. She utters sarcastic remarks on his Brahminic acts. She feels that her father's act of revenge is his downfall, as while avenging, he himself becomes an exploiter. She gets fed up with this dual role. She decides to become the fourth wife of Seth Motichand. Her decision opens her father's eyes. The moment Kalo reveals the truth, she feels that a hundred temples are less in value to her than her father's victory.

If Kalo, who belongs to the class of the exploited turns himself an exploiter to take revenge upon the exploiters; Biten, who is by caste Brahmin allows himself to be exploited by others as his punishment.

Though by caste he is a Brahmin named Bikash Mukharjee, he personates himself as a man of 'a convict class'. He repudiates his caste and suffers like a low caste person. He does not reveal his name and caste to anyone. When his sister commits suicide, Bikash flings his sacred thread away and renounces his caste. He feels guilty for the exploitation of his sister by his caste fellows. Biten advises Kalo to retaliate by becoming a Brahmin as he knows this is the caste which exploits other castes. Through Kalo, he takes revenge on the society for the sins committed by his own caste members. In Kalo's revelation of truth in the end gives satisfaction of his own victory to him.

All the three themes of poverty, hunger and exploitation cannot be separated in this novel, as they constitute a vicious cycle. The three types of hungers: hunger for food, for money and for sex are shown as a result of political, economic and social exploitation.

Kalo the protagonist leaves the town like other artisans so that his daughter may 'never have to fear hunger' (107). He leaves the town to escape from the fear of hunger but it follows him like a shadow. The novelist mirrors the horrors of the hunger. Kalo finds a large number of destitutes lying dead near the railway line. When Kalo's rice scatters on the ground 'Ravenous men and women with whoops of joy fell on his food and in a minute not a grain was left (26).

On such a background Kalo's act of stealing bananas looks very ordinary. When he feels unbearably hungry, he cannot prevent himself from stealing the fruit "His eyes were trapped by the fruit. It gave him unbearable ache. His hunger seemed to grow a hundredfold... he kept his eyes on bananas, torturing himself" (30).

The magistrate who knows nothing about the hunger, sentences him for three months rigorous imprisonment. When Kalo tries to convince the judge that the act was done with an urge to live, the

judge asks him, “Why did you have to live?”(31) He repeats the questions for each of Kalo’s statement. The question suggests that the life of the poor is not worthy of living. The question upsets Kalo’s faith in the value system. It turns his life upside down. But he passively surrenders to the exploitation and accepts the punishment.

Kalo reaches Calcutta to earn his living but cannot get a job of honest means. He finds poverty and hunger every where. On the one hand the poor suffer from hunger and poverty and on the other the rich accumulate wealth by hook or crook. The poor are hungry for food; the rich are hungry for money and sex.

Two great hungers had struck the land of Bengal in the wake of war: the hunger of the masses of people uprooted from the old earth and turned into beggars and the hunger of the all-owning few for and more pleasure, a raging fever of the times. Uprooted women with their own kind of hunger had to cool the raging pleasure-fever with their bodies.” (53)

When the poor suffer from the fever of illness, the rich suffer from the fever of sex, money and other pleasures. Dr.R. S. Singh in *Indian Novel in English: A Critical Study*, says,

Bhattacharya not only records the misery of the poor but of the rich also. The irony of the situation very ably presents the ghastly contrast between affluence and poverty, power and helplessness, goodness and hypocrisy. (Singh 67)

Kalo becomes aware of the fact that the rich who are indifferent to the miseries of the poor, indulge in immoral acts and unlawful and immoral transactions. If the rich can be richer through unfair means, he feels that nothing is wrong in making the poor accept the unfair ways to survive.

Bhattacharya gives us a pathetic picture of innumerable cruelties to which the human beings are subjected due to poverty and hunger. Hunger brings mankind to a despicable level. Honour becomes the easiest target. Hunger provokes to do anything and everything deprived. It gives birth to various kinds of perverse activities and exploitation. The law of brutes prevails and everything is reduced to mere brutality.

Syamala Rao in the book *Bhabani Bhattacharya* observes, "Bhabani Bhattacharya presents a deep insight into the fact, that no one knows to what abysmal depths poverty degrades a man" (Rao 75). Some instances of the plight of the destitutes in the novel prove this point.

There was nothing unusual in the sight of women crouching in the dust, each with a child, each holding an empty jam tin picked out of some rubbish heap. There were familiar figures of women and pot bellied rachitic children. (125-26)

The miseries of women crouching in dust add to the pathetic picture of men robbing the food by thrusting their fingers into the mouths of each other. In his account, Bhattacharya says,

One of the soldiers thrust his hand and tossed something out of the window. Instantly the men came to life. They fell on their knees and groped, scrambled. Uttering small cries and whimpers, they jostled and fought. In a few moments it was all over. The huddled creatures rose, panting to their feet. But two or three of them crouched still; they had bread in their mouths, which they swallowed quickly. Yes they had good reason to be quick. Kalo saw one destitute man thrust his fingers into the mouth of another, force it open, scoop out the

bread and lump the masticated mass into his own mouth, while the victim beat helplessly with his thin sticks of arms and blubbered. (128)

The scenes of destitutes, fighting with the dogs for crumbs of bread or carrying corpses on their heads for normal wages or helpless mothers discarding and selling away their children become very common. The young girls who are victims of hunger are bought from their parents or stolen or lured away with false promises. The youngsters do the job of the agents for the runners of the brothels who may be highly respected lawyers or bankers; the pillars of the society.

The yell of hunger “Baba.... hunger kills me, Baba... Give me one sip of rice water... I cannot bear this anymore Baba....” (48) can be heard everywhere in the bowels of Bengal. “There was unspeakable misery, revolting ugliness the creeping horror of slow death”(50).

When Kalo rescues his daughter from the harlot-house, he feels his daughter is polluted. Though Lekha is much more to him than the object of purity, he gets angry with the age old tradition. “Kalo had not only to deny but to eradicate the values by which he had been bred. He had to cut his social taproot and give up his inheritance” (71). This time he does not surrender to the exploitation but decides to mount on it. The ‘exploited’ becomes the ‘exploiter’.

Kalo rides the tiger to take revenge upon the exploiters, under the mask of a Brahmin on the advice of Biten who says, “They hit us where it hurts badly - in the belly. We’ve got to hit back” (38). Society hurts not only him but also his daughter. Society not only hits in the belly but also in the soul. He in his disguise easily deceives people. Dr. Krishna Sharma, a critic rightly observes:

As a man whose strength seemed based on his inner mettle, is

easily able to fool the high born Brahmins, banyas, sightseers, stragglers and the rich. With deceit and cunning, he is able to bring round the same men and magnates of the society under thumb, who had spat on him and humiliated him. He mocks at the evils of injustice... He feels happy at his success. (Sharma 110)

Bhattacharya attacks the selfish people who exploit the poor in the name of God. Through the ritual of 'Shiva's milk bath' he shows the hypocrisy of the rich people. The ritual is started to attract the customers to the temple business. "Men of wealth with no time or heart for prayer and penance, gave willingly for the ritual, the easier way for them to gain merit" (117). Through such rituals the rich gain name and fame. The poor also succumb to such rituals out of their blind faith and belief. When Kalo realizes that a particular peasant wants to perform the ritual but he has not enough money for it he shows readiness to offer milk to the god on behalf of the poor destitute without money, the peasant touches the Brahmin's feet and says, "Don't deny me, sir. These pieces are all I have been able to save. It will buy not more than half a tumbler; But if I fail to pay, what I can, no merit is gained" (130). Harish Raizada a critic in "Bhabani Bhattacharya : Novelist of Social Ferment." rightly says

He Who Rides a Tiger exposes the wicked practices of the hollow religion, employed by the vested interests to exploit the blind faith of simple and credulous people. Religion seems to have lost its pristine glory and forgotten its basic ethical values. It is turned into a spiritual trade where people try to buy spiritual merit in exchange of merchandise. The cheats and the sharks... become the upholders of the religion and use it for their selfish gains. Bhairabis and mendicants are bribed to create a spiritual halo round a simple girl like Lekha and

popularize her as the Mother of sevenfold Bliss. The newspapers like Swadesh owned by businessmen are used to publicize widely her psychic personality so that the people in search of the miracles may throng before her and make liberal gifts of their earnings to her. Yogis are employed to dupe a credulous lady like Radha so that she may permit her wealthy husband to have a fifth wife to save her from widowhood as ordained by the gods. (Raizada 162)

Bhattacharya suggests that whether it is the rich or the poor, everybody looks at the god as a customer. If you want to buy merits you must pay for it. By making Abalbandhu, the chairman of the board of the temple trustees, Bhattacharya makes parody of the system. Abalbandhu means 'a friend of poor.' Everyone knows he had cornered great quantities of rice. "As scarcity grew, as masses of people died of hunger, his margin of profit increased. Masses of people had to die so he could profit" (125). Most of the members of the board of trusty belong to the class of Abalbandhu. They invest their money in the temple business to gain more and more.

Bhattacharya laughs at the insensible demands of the rich through their rituals when one of the devotees says "Let the price of gold go high and yet higher..." (136). Another devotee says "Let gold go down and down more" (136). What can the god do when two devotees make the same kind of offering with counter wishes?

Through the meeting which takes place over the issue of the milk of Shiva's bath, Bhattacharya laughs at the funny ideas of the charity in the high class society. One says that he fed a thousand beggars, blind men and cripples at his father's funeral ceremony. Another donor says his wife has organized a charity show for the governor's famine fund. But it is contradictory that they do not find

charity in giving the milk of Shiva's bath to the hungry babies of the destitutes.

In India anyone can make money by wearing a saffron loin cloth, smearing his body with ashes and making a red pest trident of Shiva on his forehead. If you walk in this drapery in the streets your alms bowls will fill up in no time and if you are lucky you may turn a yogi with great spiritual power. Anyone can make a milch-cow of Indians who have large funds of faith and cash.

Food for the soul is produced and sold like food for the stomach, and though the two trades are different, you pay for both with hard cash. The temple is a market and the priest a dealer. People are always ready to pay well for feeding the inner man!.(41)

Bhattacharya wants to attack a number of evils in our society, which make the lives of the poor miserable. Through the comparison of the deaths of the poor and the rich he attacks the evil rituals of Hindu religion. There are no rites performed after the death of destitutes. The dead bodies of destitutes are carried away by the municipality people in the garbage vans. On the other hand, in the funeral procession of the rich large quantities of rice and copper coins are scattered in the street. The rich do it to earn goodly measure of merit for the soul. But Kalo asks “What will happen to the departing souls of those dying in the street without any ritual? Were they doomed to haunt the earth forever as specters? ... was heaven meant only for the rich alone?”(52)

Hunger does not see religion or caste. While talking about a destitute child, Obhijit, Kalo says to Motichand that like a hungry kamar or an untouchable boy “even a hungry Brahmin boy would eat

from garbage cans”(218). Hundreds of hungry people of different religions and castes demonstrate together, eat together oblivious of their caste and religion.

He attacks the caste system, where outer appearance pays handsome dividend. Vishwanath, the Kamar, praises Kalo, “So long as there are true hearted Brahmins like you, people cannot loose faith in this social order” (126). The irony of the situation is that the pujari who is a Brahmin in origin, is not considerate to the low caste hungry people whereas Kalo, a pseudo-Brahmin, cares for the lower castes which startles Vishwanath, the blacksmith and makes him praise Kalo for his generous gesture. Kalo receives this praise not as a human being but as a Brahmin.

Hunger makes Kalo, Biten and Vishwanath protest against caste. Kalo experiences exploitation on the basis of the caste even in his moderate days at town. Nobody in Jharana congratulates a Kamar girl who wins the medal defeating the high caste boys and girls in an essay competition at state level but he tolerates it. He tolerates his exploitation at the court of magistrate but the exploitation of his daughter at the brothel turns him rebellious. In this regard K. R. Chandrasekharan says,

The point emphasized by Bhattacharya here is that caste has become a habit of thinking, as much as a way of life and therefore extremely difficult to eradicate. How the feelings of superiority engendered by belonging to a high caste can intoxicate and turn the head, is illustrated by the ironic case of Kalo himself. To begin with, he puts on the cloak of Brahminhood as part of a deliberate trick. The victims of the hoax are to be primarily the very classes whose ranks he joins surreptitiously through the backdoor. But in a very short time

the Brahminism affects his mind and he out-Herods Herod when he rebukes the Kamar, Vishwanath for polluting him with his touch. Although this is a temporary state of intoxication in Kalo, the incident illustrates the arrogance of the higher caste people. The treatment of Obhijit by the pujari's wife is another example of the tyranny of caste (Chandrasekharan 69-70)

Kalo thinks that one of the reasons of miseries of the poor is the hierarchy of the caste system. Brahmins at the top exploit the low caste at the bottom. By accepting Brahminism, he tries to gain wealth and happiness. With the parallel example of Biten, Bhattacharya shows that happiness has nothing to do with Brahminism. Biten, who is a high caste Brahmin, suffers to such an extent that he throws away the Brahminic thread and becomes a 'victim caste'.

Biten experiences the evil of caste system in a different manner. Biten's sister becomes the victim of the rigid caste system. In order to avoid social disgrace by marrying their daughter to a young boy of the lower caste, the parents marry her to a widower who has not only children but also grandchildren. The marriage ends with the suicide of his sister. Biten calls it a murder committed by the evil caste system. But he also realizes that the root cause of the tragedy is poverty. His parents who love their daughter fail to find a proper match in their caste due to their inability to pay handsome dowry. Biten protests by discarding his caste.

The Juxtaposition of Biten's rejection of the Brahminhood which is his birth right and Kalo's renunciation of the Brahminhood he has created for himself through fraud makes the novelist's condemnation of the system total" (Chandrasekharan, 69).

Vishwanath, another Kamar, loses his faith in God. When his grandchild dies of hunger and when his wife and other children are lost in the streets of the big city, he asks Kalo, "Only tell me why did my little grandchild have to die of hunger? Would you blame a three year old girl for not having faith?" (120). Neither Kalo nor Mangal Adhikari has any answer. Kalo asks himself why the evil doers remain untouched and innocent people die.

Kalo sees in the existing social system an obnoxious contradiction – while men died of hunger, wealth grew, and while kindness dried up religion was more in demand. It was only the outward form of religion, the shell of ritual empty within" (125).

Bhattacharya also attacks the shallow rituals of the Hindu religion which had been one of the concerns of Gandhi. Gandhi was always against the rituals. Bhattacharya shows emptiness of rituals through a number of incidents in this novel. The incident of 'Shiva's milk bath' exposes the hypocrisy of the rich. They are ready to throw tons of milk into the Ganges but are not willing to spare it for the hungry babies which are victims of calamity. They get furious, when they come to know that the tradition is violated. They find the tradition more important than the deaths of the poor. One of the donors of milk says, "Ten thousand have died of hunger. What difference would a few more or a few less make?"(134).

Kalo's approval to the installation of his daughter Lekha as 'the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss' is an example of exploitation of a woman on the basis of religion. Kalo, as a Brahmin priest, allows her to remain unmarried by installing her as 'the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss' because he fails to get a suitable Brahmin husband for her. Lekha in her own way protests against her father by declaring her wish to

become the fifth wife of Seth Motichand. When Kalo asks her “How can you even think of it? (231). She answers “You wish that I stay buried in the temple? Forever?” (231)

At the root of Kalo’s proposal to Biten to marry his daughter on the condition of accepting the partnership in the temple business there is fear of poverty. He does not want that his daughter should suffer the miseries of poverty and hunger. Biten finds in it the same exploitation on the basis of caste, for which he had flung the brahminic thread away.

Bhattacharya shows that poverty and hunger adversely affect not only the body but also the mind. He proves it through the case of Obhijit. Obhijit keeps two slices of bread under his bed every day. A boy who had been hungry for the bread gets it easily. But the fear of not getting it the next day makes him keep it under his bed. Even after Lekha's assurance that he will get whatever he likes to eat, he cannot change his habit. “...sweets would not let Obhijit forget the rotten food from rubbish heaps.” He cannot get out of his past with its taboos and denials easily. The fear of hunger haunts him.

Bhattacharya attacks the political exploitation of the poor by the rulers in the name of administration. Instead of helping them to settle in the city, they try to send them away. The government applies temporary methods to eradicate poverty. Through the evacuation squad strategy, Bhattacharya tries to show that some people may think sending the village people back to the countryside can solve the hunger problem of the cities. Villagers go to the big cities with the belief that big cities will offer them jobs. But they get thunderstruck when they find that thousands of hungry men already existing in the city. They realize that to find a job is like chasing a mirage in the big cities. If they go back they can till their fields. But the fact is most of

the destitutes are landless labourers and those with lands have either mortgaged or sold their ancestral lands. This solution will "Throw the hunger back into the countryside, there it will remain unseen"(194).

Bhattacharya attacks the existing law system. The black marketeers who corner the food and turn the common man's savings to one fifth are no better than common thieves but they walk freely. The common people like Kalo steal fruits to save themselves from hunger and get rigorous imprisonment. The rulers imprison the poor destitute in order to avoid possible crime and violence in the city. The intentions of the jail houses may be even to make a convict fear the prison so that he will not break the law again. But it works out in a different way. Day by day, the convict loses his fear. He starts hating everything. Hatred becomes a disease of his mind. In spite of becoming a good citizen, he becomes a criminal. Imprisonment is one of the reasons of Kalo's rebirth as Mangal Adhikari.

Like most of his novels, Bhattacharya shows the impact of Gandhian philosophy in this novel too. As the novel is set in the Gandhian period of the history of India, he deals with the social evils Gandhi wanted to eradicate from the society. He deals with the debased, degrading caste system of Hindu religion which Gandhi condemns for its brutality or inhumanity. Untouchability had always been the prime concern of Gandhi. Upgradation of the untouchables was one of his dreams. By making his protagonist rebel against the caste system, Bhattacharya shows his concern towards the untouchables.

Most of the common people feel that the root cause of poverty and hunger is in the evil social system. Many surrender to it passively, calling it their destiny. They suffer and die. But some people like Kalo revolt against such evil system. Kalo rises to the top

of the social hierarchy by upsetting the old social order but instead of undermining the society he becomes the part of it. The revolt of a Kamar becoming a Brahmin does not make any difference to the order to which he truly belongs and to which he attaches himself. He is alienated from his class and feels lonely. While playing the role of Mangal Adhikari - The priest, Kalo becomes one with the role and almost forgets his revenge. It is easier to fight for one's purpose and principles than to live up to them. Money should be one of the means of happiness; it cannot be the aim of life. If you get money and lose happiness you are the loser; if you lose money and get happiness you are the winner.

Kalo rides the tiger and gains name and fame. His upgradation in the hierarchy of the castes, offers him and his daughter every thing they wanted and everything they cannot even imagine. But the accumulation of wealth decays the emotional bond between the father and the daughter. As the story develops the emotional gulf between the two widens. This emotional gulf is bridged as soon as Kalo throws away the mask of a rich Brahmin priest and returns to his true self.

The Goddess Named Gold

Bhattacharya's fourth novel *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960) is an allegory. Some critics call it a modern fable of rural India. New York Herald Tribune calls it 'a tragicomic story skillfully told'. As the title suggests, the novel primarily deals with man's lust or hunger for gold, power and possession. Rajaram, one of the five elders of village Sonamitti, says that every one needs a little gold "even the aged ones have a hunger for it." Bhattacharya satirizes man's hunger for gold. Seth's hunger for gold and power is in conflict with the

minstrel's vision of free India.

The story opens with the meeting of the 'cow house five', a group consisting of five peasant women and the Seth's wife. They discuss the burning problem of their village Sonamitti. Being the only shopkeeper, Seth Shamsunder creates artificial scarcity of cloth. Women are compelled to wear rags and patched over clothes. The 'cow house five' take a procession of women to the shop, demanding the sale of saris on moderate rates. But the Seth does not pay any heed to their demands. The young leader Meera threatens "A hundred women will strip themselves bare and throw their rags on his hoarded shame" (27). The shameless Seth asks her to go ahead. But when his wife Laxmi starts removing her clothes he surrenders.

The Seth decides to contest the election in order to recover his loss. He decides to bring a film-show in the village as an election strategy but would not allow the women to watch it. The 'cow house five' is displeased with the decision. Meera asks her grandfather who is a minstrel to perform a bhajan at the same time. When the grandfather refuses to do so they play a different trick and defeat the Seth.

The film-show is followed by the Bhajan. At the end of it the minstrel ties the amulet on Meera's arm. He tells the villagers that if a person with the amulet performs an act of kindness, all copper on his or her body will turn into gold. He leaves the village the next day. The Seth offers Meera fifty percent partnership in an amulet business and sponsors her to perform various acts of kindness. But the magic does not work. Meera feels sorry for the failure because she fails to use it for the betterment of the villagers. After so many failures the villagers start looking at Meera as Seth's business agent. Sohanlal, the Seth's driver succeeds in convincing the people of her honest intention. But the

Halwai on the other side tries to convince them of her ill intention and proposes to burn Meera's effigy for her being a witch.

When the Seth's final attempt of the act of kindness fails, Meera removes the amulet off her body. The minstrel arrives and reveals the truth that he played the trick to teach a lesson to the greedy Seth. He shows Meera the grim picture of the village had the magic turned to reality. Meera throws away the amulet into the river. He tells the villagers that miracles do not take place automatically but they have to be created with love and labour. On the request of the villagers the minstrel decides to live in the village forever.

As the novel is allegoric all the characters are symbolic. Meera, the protagonist, belongs to a peasant class. She is shown rebellious by nature. She protests against the economic exploitation by the Seth, but behaves like a submissive, superstitious peasant girl before her grandfather's magic trick. Being an illiterate, rustic girl she easily believes in her grandpa's words and becomes an alchemist or Sonamai for the villagers. Due to her strong faith in her grandpa she feels she can bring happiness to the villagers with the help of the touchstone. To fulfill this dream she is carried away by the words of the cunning Seth.

Being the protagonist, Meera is not expected to be trapped by the Seth. Chandrasekharan criticizes Meera's gullibility thus:

Meera herself is a breath-taking combination of intelligence, generosity, patriotism and stupidity. She is the heroine only up to the moment that she goes to the Seth in response to his summons in order to discuss their mortgaged land, but mere stuffed puppet after she enters into the strange contract with the cormorant and begins playing the fool. The reader shares the sorrow and disappointment of Sohanlal at the spectacle of her gullibility and folly. (Chandrasekharan 102)

But this gullibility makes her character more life like. Her belief in the grandpa's words and his magical touchstone cannot be called a folly. An innocent, rustic girl fascinated by her grandpa's words believes in the magic of taveez. An intelligent mind behind all activities against the Seth can purposely get entrapped for the betterment of the poor villagers. She rises above petty loyalties and narrow interests for the benefit of the villagers. She does not remain loyal to her friends in their moves against the Seth. She has her own logic. She feels she can achieve the same goal but in a different manner. They share the same ultimate goal of the betterment of the villagers. She wants to use magical touchstone to make Sonamitti a bright jewel. She wants to wipe the tears from every eye. Laxmi finds spiritual hunger on her face.

She has no hunger for gold or money. She becomes Sonamai for Sonamitti. When Sohanlal asks what she would do, if she got money she says that she would pay off not only all her debts but also her friends' debts. She feels money is significant only if it fulfils the needs of the people. It is the means and not the aim, as she says,

Gold in itself has no value. Gold is a strip of field released from bonds. Gold is a new straw thatch on the walks of a mud hut. It is the rag-woman's escape from hunger and old father's wish for pilgrimage to Holy Benares" (175).

People of Sonamitti accept that "Meera has less hunger for riches than everyone else in this village' (225). A girl of her age has natural attraction towards gold but Meera is of a different type who values gold and copper equally. She expresses her astonishment over people's lust for gold she says, "This is copper, Grandpa, with gold wash it looks good enough. Hard to understand why people hanker for pure gold or at least silver" (74).

When the Seth tries to exploit her innocence and the villagers lose their faith in her, she loses her confidence. When the people ironically start calling her 'king's daughter' a female counterpart of the Seth, possible exploiter of the poor in future, she throws away all the ornaments and coins on her body. When she realizes that the magic of touchstone may disturb the simple life of villagers upside down, and may corrupt the human relations, she comes out of the spell of the magic touch stone and throws it away.

If Meera is a symbol of sacrifice, Seth Shamsunder is a symbol of all round exploitation. He is a symbol of hunger for gold and power. Some of the fundamental values such as self-sacrifice, kindness and dignity are tested by Bhattacharya against selfish, unkind, hypocrite exploiter Seth Shamsunder. Chandrasekharan says "Shamsunder, the Seth is nothing but a caricature of the greedy exploiter" (Chandrasekharan 102). The Seth can be compared with Shakespeare's Shylock. He is endlessly busy in increasing his margin of profit. He thinks "Gold has a last word" (63).

He carries a character like a spider which casts its web around the poor peasants. The Seth reveals his philosophy of life when he talks to an invisible spider. "Trap the fools, fatten on their meat"(96). He ultimately proves it by trapping every individual of Sonamitti in his net of debts.

It is very paradoxical that an exploiter like the Seth gets such a kind hearted wife. If the Seth is an incarnation of hunger for gold and power, Laxmi is the one for love for all. Grandpa says "Laxmi, there is no gift as precious as your love."(74). The Seth's greed or lust for money makes him unsympathetic towards the poor; on the contrary Laxmi is caring and sympathetic towards the poor. Though she belongs to the rich class of exploiters, she never exploits anyone.

Despite living under the roof of the Seth, she remains faithful to the class of the exploited. She is sexually, emotionally and spiritually exploited for her humble status as a woman by her ruthless husband. She feels guilty for her parents' indebtedness to her husband.

Meera's grandfather, a minstrel, is a symbol of Gandhian philosophy. He not only talks about Gandhi but lives his philosophy. He is aware of the malpractices of the people like the Seth who exploit the common folk. To teach him a lesson he plays the trick of touchstone magic.

Bhattacharya keeps the poverty and hunger for food, at the background of the story. There are very rare instances of hunger for food. Most of the villagers except the Seth and Halwai are poor. The life in Indian countryside is marked by poverty, hunger and exploitation. Sonamitti is a village of fertile land yielding fine cotton sufficient for the whole district. But most of the villagers fall upon the mercy of the moneylender for expenses borne against the rituals like child birth, marriage and even funeral. They get enough to eat but not to spare. Due to their illiteracy they easily fall victim to the Seth's exploitation:

A loan standing in the Seth's ledger doubled itself in a twelve month. When he paid out twenty rupees, the figure he entered in his book was forty - a year's interest charged in advance as soon as the loan was given. The debtor could whine or howl but had no option. If you dislike my terms, go elsewhere. Go to the big moneylender in town.... So the debtor swallowed his saliva and put his thumb-mark on the bond and went his way. When he returned to the cloth shop after harvest the money he paid lessened the balance but the remainder doubled itself with the

new year's advance interest added. So it went on year after year.(67, 68)

It is this kind of feudal economic exploitation that Bhattacharya focuses on. In this context, what Balram Sarot in *The Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya* says, is noteworthy:

Bhabani Bhattacharya deals with the theme of economic freedom of hungry masses and warns against the evils of profiteering and poverty which, if not completely eradicated, may defeat the very purpose of freedom and lead to many more hungers. With the freedom in sight, people have to work with solidarity and faith to ameliorate their lot and make their country prosperous. They have also to be on their guard against the greedy rich men who may exploit freedom for their own selfish ends.(Sarot 78)

The rich think that they can buy anything with their money. The Seth believes that by offering money to the girl who saved his only son, he performs his duty towards her. Halwai proposes young Meera with the belief that money can remove the barrier of caste and religion between Meera and him. He can make the five elders of the village ignore their racial discrimination by paying them money. They call themselves super-beings. "Whoever gained the metal, more and more and yet more, came up on top and all bowed to him with palms folded"(153). They test the man's worth in the form of gold.

Bhattacharya concentrates on the exploiters' hunger for gold and power and satires upon their hunger. He shows hunger for gold existing even in the poor people, but he does not laugh at it. He makes us understand that at the root of their hunger for gold, there is a basic hunger for food. There seems to be two other hungers - villagers' hunger for magic or miracle and Meera's hunger for spiritual

experience. The villagers say, “We hunger for miracle whatever else may follow good or bad” (207). Meera’s belief in her Grandpa’s words make her wait for spiritual experience. Looking at her face Laxmi “saw the hunger that was like one possessed” (255).

At the root of the villagers’ hunger for miracle, there is the basic hunger for food. They want miracles to happen to remove their poverty. At the root of Meera’s, hunger there is people’s hunger for food. Gold, which is a symbol of wealth, is presented as a symbol of the richness of spirit and mind. K. K. Sharma rightly says,

An unusual emphasis is laid on one of the fundamental human values, viz., selfless and spontaneous kindness emanating from the spirit of compassion” (Sharma, 34).

The alchemist has to perform an act of real kindness in order to turn copper into gold. Chandrasekharan criticizes Bhattacharya for losing its seriousness and purpose for which the novel is written. He ridicules Bhattacharya for incredibility of such belief in the myth of the touchstone. He says,

Regarding the most important episode in the novel, namely, the presentation of the amulet to Meera and her subsequent attempts to make it function, it has no credibility even in the setting of a most backward Indian village. The Indian peasant is hard-boiled realist seasoned by centuries of harsh experience and not the type of person to be fooled into believing in a taveez that could work as the philosopher’s stone. The spectacle presented in the novel that of a sensible girl burdening her body with all sorts of copper ornaments and attempting to pull off the trick and the entire village sharing her faith in the amulet and adding to her burden is too crude to be

true even in a lands of fakirs and magicians. (Chandresekharan 101)

But such things are not uncommon in Indian society. The poverty stricken rural society has always been superstitious. They always expect some kind of magic to take place to change their miserable plight. They easily believe in Sadhus and Fakirs not for their magic but for their assurance of bright future. It is not incredible that villagers believe in the magic of touchstone, especially when it is given by a minstrel who has returned from snow peaks of the Himalayas, acquiring miraculous and magical powers by penance. Meera believes in it not only because it is given by her grandpa but also because she finds a way to wipe off the tears of all the villagers in it.

A large number of women in the village go to Meera with copper coins to request her to remove their poverty with her touchstone. Even when, Grandma tells them that it is foolishness to believe in such things, they show their blind faith in Meera's touchstone. They look at it with hope. They know, even if they work throughout the life they cannot become rich. They do not want to use their logic as they do not want to lose their hope.

The Seth believes in it not only because of his faith in minstrel but also because he anticipates a lot of money and power in it. Bhattacharya wants to illustrate that all men, rich or poor, are obsessed with hunger of one kind or the other. Some people exploit others to satisfy their hunger, some people get exploited while satisfying their hunger. Man's hunger for gold is not an end in itself. It gives birth to so many hungers. But Bhattacharya makes distinction between the hungers of the rich and the poor. The poor people's hunger for gold is

an outcome of their hunger for happiness. For the rich people gold is not the means of achieving anything but an aim in itself.

The minstrel makes the Seth supply funds to Meera in order to perform acts of kindness. He keeps on spending money and forgets his business. He is exploited by the minstrel but in a different manner. The minstrel succeeds in his plan of giving relief to the villagers. Under the spell of touchstone, he forgets his routine work and his ledger of loans. But as soon as he realizes that his plan has failed, he starts thinking about exploitation of people.

The exploiters, like spiders, wait greedily for devouring victims. The Seth watches as a spider ensnaring ants and gets fascinated because he identifies himself with it. Both trap and destroy their gullible victims. Seth says,

Why deny the hard-working spider its well-earned meal? Here was an instance of the way nature worked its ruthless principle. The slow-witted were meant to be the prey of their betters, the weak had to feed the strong with their flesh. The fittest alone were fit to survive. (96)

Most of the villagers are indebted to the Seth. They express their bitter anger against him but they cannot revolt against him. They do not blame the Seth for their miseries. They blame their destiny. Burden of loan becomes part and parcel of their life. They are not afraid of loans but of the crazy rates of interests “Loans by themselves did not hurt much... the crazy rate of interest made payment hard or even impossible.... She had every right to charge interest, but not in Seth’s way, not with the aim to break the debtor’s back” (205).

Bhattacharya wants to warn against such seths who are robbers of free India.

Seths of many kinds. The cities had a greater variety and profusion of them than the countryside. There was the money-seth, of course, to whom freedom meant a chance to seize fields of trade vacated by the aliens. Then the seth of politics ready to dupe the people with the power of his glib tongue. The official seth, a man of arrogance ready to change masters without a charge of mentality, human chattel upon to the best offer. The seth of religion with gods for sale. The seth with a Gandhi cap on his head and the cap itself a deceit. And several others on the list...(119)

The days after independence are more arduous than the days before. The country should be saved from wolfish exploiters like the Seth. Mere gold is not enough to save the poor, helpless people. What is more important than gold is to crush such Seths. The fight with the Seth will save India and not a miracle or gold.

Bulaki Rao, a Deevanji, can be considered as one of the participants in economic exploitation. Such Deevanjis are the termites of the village economy. But in the novel Bhattacharya has given him an additional dimension of the caste. Being a Brahmin he is expected to be a man of wisdom. He not only sucks the blood of the debtors but also blackmails the Seth. He does not hesitate to exploit the Seth in his acts of kindness.

Bhattacharya touches not only feudal system but almost all the evil practices in the countryside. He attacks the dowry system. "A dowry for a maid, well past her marriage age; she had no good looks, but a match could be arranged for eighty rupees' (181). He attacks corruption and bribery as the future evils of free India. Quite ironically, he visualizes corrupt practices of contractors, commission agencies of elected leaders and bribe taker government

representatives. A Halwai of Sonamitti says, “Sethji... the contractor fellow may just as well deal with me. I know what low-grade cement he has earmarked for the bridge... What do I care, so long as I get my ten percent !” (170). Even if the contractor is arrested “The crocodile will not lose his skin. He will simply have to part once more with some of his gains” (170).

Bhattacharya warns that no one in free India should be content to live on charity. No one should surrender to the exploitation “We must demand what should be ours, the right to live as human beings”(176). If virtues like compassion and love are not brought in practice, if there is no liberation of mind and spirit, the conflict between the rich and the poor will not diminish in free India. Bhattacharya expresses his resplendent vision of life. He wishes for the general welfare of the poor. He wants liberation of the poor from illiteracy and superstitions that are at the base of their exploitation.

Bhattacharya shows his concern about women exploitation in the patriarchal system. He wants to attack the conventional attitude of men towards women. Through the dramatization of women’s victory over men in the ban of film show, he wants to defy patriarchal system. He makes the reader aware of the fact that women, on the verge of the freedom have become aware of their exploitation by ‘men’. They express their anger over men’s tyranny for the freedom for which they fought with men against the foreigners is not given to them. The women feel that the union of men and women is rare but necessary. . It is possible only when man and woman treat each-other as equals. “Where is true union between man and woman unless they accept each other as equals?”(225).

In the society, where “A woman’s life is not worth two cowdung pallets” (6). Where she is helpless before male domination

“What can a women do? What strength has she against her household king?”(5). It is necessary that women should cross the threshold and challenge the male domination. Bhattacharya makes them come out on the road. When the country is on the verge of political freedom, women should fight for their social freedom. “Freedom, four steps ahead. Not for use, women. We live to press our masters’ legs... we have shouted in anger at the alien coat and pantaloons. Our dhoti-clad fellows are ten times worse” (43).

Bashful women forget their modesty. Indian women, for whom dignity is more valuable than life, threaten the Seth that they will expose their bareness before the people. This is an extraordinary and unusual kind of threat given by the Indian rural traditional women. Their first attempt fails but they win under the leadership of the determinant Laxmi. By the bold decisions, the women prove that they are endowed with greater mettle in resolving the issues. For Bhattacharya’s attitude towards women, Symala Rao says, “In essence it is feminist novel as the liberation of the country from the clutches of the Sethji is accomplished by women only”(Rao 80). Though he emphasizes the key role, women have to play after independence, he touches upon some of the male aspects. Marlene Fisher says,

Although the novels of Bhattacharya tend to be centered around his female characters, their themes touch broadly upon some of the most vital aspects of men and women alike particularly men and women as members of society.(qtd in Rao 82)

The victory of women hurts the Seth’s male ego. He tries to provoke thoughts of male superiority among men. His statement ‘Spare the women and they get spoiled’ proves ironical, on the background of women’s second victory over the Seth in the film show game. The betterment of life is the ultimate goal for Bhattacharya.

Freedom is a means to that end, and one can attain it only through hard labour and love. Each of us has to win the freedom to be free. He highlights the basic human instincts by showing victory of morality over selfishness. Through the minstrel he reveals his faith in goodness which can uproot the evil from the society because there is ample goodness in the people.

Bhattacharya shows his socialistic, Gandhian attitude towards free India, when the minstrel says, "Enough earth for all if shared fairly. So much belongs to so few. The same tale everywhere. One man owns half a village; the tillers have the rest in five hundred morsels" (69). We can feel Gandhian impact throughout the novel. The 'cow house five' is an example of Gandhian influence. In the Quit India Movement, Gandhi insisted upon women's active participation. Bhattacharya shows the march of women for Satyagraha in the very beginning of the novel. He shows that women of a small village perform the rebellious act of saluting the flag and show courage to go to prison

Through the character of the minstrel Bhattacharya presents Gandhian philosophy. When Meera requests him to take revenge upon the Seth, the minstrel speaks Gandhi's words "You cannot right one wrong with another. You cannot fight malice with malice.... Those who mock at goodness mock themselves; for there is a secret goodness in them also" (62,63).

Even in his Kathas, the minstrel refers to the father of the nation. "An old man whose voice has filled this country for thirty years has a curious wish in his heart. It is to wipe every tear from every eye"(75). Meera becomes an ardent follower of Gandhi. She wishes to use the touchstone to wipe every tear from the eyes of the poor. The entire speech delivered by the minstrel at the climax of the

story tells the philosophy of Gandhi.

The novel thus unfolds various examples of exploitations of the ignorant Indian masses living in villages who try to overcome their poverty and hunger through the supernatural means like magic and miracle. Bhattacharya exposes the worthlessness of such a miracle in eradication of poverty, hunger and exploitation.