Chapter 2
Poverty versus Affluence

The opening chapter of So Many Hungers! presents the historical background of the novel—the beginning of the Second World War—which renders change a historical necessity. To Rahoul Basu's mother the beginning of the war is the signal to buy "a half-year's supply" of rice, mustard oil, sugar, clothing and tinned fish (Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers! 6). To Rahoul's father, Samarendra Basu, the war offers the "chance of a life-time" to make money on the share market by investing in steel and gold and to thereby become "a Napoleon of finance" (Hungers 9-10). The base instincts of hoarding and greed triggered by the war lead to the painful social change and misery witnessed in Bengal, as the novel proceeds to show poignantly.

Rahoul, a freedom-seeker, believes that the war will lead to the birth of a new epoch, that the idealism invoked by the Allied Powers against the enemy would strike at their own rot, and, that India, participating in the war waged for democratic freedom, would inexorably move towards national freedom (Hungers 9-12). Rahoul represents the idealist youth of contemporary India. He has scant respect for the views of his father, who,
he maintains, belongs to "a life, an age, that has fled" (Hungers 17). Rahoul prefers the counsel of his grandfather, Devesh, an eccentric recluse who lives in a remote village named Baruni among peasants and participates in the struggle for national freedom (Hungers 17). At a young age, under the influence of his grandfather, Rahoul almost jumped into the national movement, but his father cleverly steered him away from it and sent him to Cambridge instead (Hungers 21-22).

Revered as Devata by the peasants, Rahoul's grandfather is engaged in village reconstruction, which is given top priority in the national movement. He observes that the British Government does not like this kind of work and that the Government and the landlords have grown to fear "the peasant masses". He comments that this has exposed those who, till recently, posed as the champions of the "voiceless people as against the intellectual classes, the sedition-mongers who talk of freedom for all." Devata runs an evening school for the villagers. A spy has been set by the rulers to watch the school and they want to break it up because mass literacy is a danger for the rulers since it would make "the trampled ones conscious of their birth-right—the right to live as human beings" (Hungers 22-27). Rahoul believes that India cannot live much longer
under such a system (Hunger 28).

Rahoul's grandfather takes him to one of his adopted families for a meal—the family of his "daughter," his grandsons Kanu and Onu, his grand daughter Kajoli and the cow Mangala. When Kajoli kneels down to welcome Rahoul with the traditional washing of the guest's feet, Rahoul protests, but his grandfather exhorts him to accept the traditional courtesy (Hunger 27-28). Devata says:

"She [Kajoli] is a well-bred peasant girl. She has a legacy of manners as old as India. How could she give up her manners and proprieties to suit your new-fangled city ideas? You are a respected visitor in the house—[.]" (Hunger 28).

Samarendra Basu makes piles of money on the stock market by playing his cards well, buying at each reaction and selling at higher levels. The stock market moves "like the swaying of a see-saw" and each movement lays upon his lap "a golden dust of profit." He even neglects his practice at the High Court. New ideas jostle in his mind—new lines of business. He has no qualm about the Allies' betrayal of Abyssinia to Mussolini (Hunger 28-30). Rahoul is impatient with his father's decadent and selfish attitude:
Father wouldn't understand. Born in England, he would have been a Tory diehard. Born in India, he was conditioned by the same spiritual bondage and something worse. It was his kind, bred in the decadence that overtakes a race at certain periods in history—yes, it was his kind that had made possible England's long-drawn occupation of India. A great War was giving the age-long problem a razor's edge. But not in his father's mind. That mind was unshaken as ever, insensitive. It thought of War only as a rare chance to reap a harvest of gold. Devata to have such a son! The bitter irony! Hurt, unhappy, Rahoul looked at his father. His reverence and his love winced under his scornful thoughts. (Hungris 30-31)

Samarendra's attitude, however, is ironically centred outside himself:

it was all for his sons' sake—with wealth heaped at his feet, his own personal needs were 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. Rahoul, Kunal—they would be shielded from those burning worries he had known in the
hateful years of struggle and pain. And the little one in the house [Rahoul's daughter], she now in her eighth month, she would be reared in luxury; bejewelled like a princess, she would move proudly in society, and, when of age, have a big dowry and wed an officer high up in the Imperial Service. (Hungers 31).

To Samarendra Basu the War is a "god-sent opportunity," not only in terms of shares but also in terms of other ideas. For instance, he dreams of his son Rahoul, the astrophysicist, harnessing science to the service of the Empire, inventing some secret wonder weapon, and winning glory—perhaps a title. He is obsessed with the idea of winning the title of Rai Bahadur for himself and, as a means to that end, decides to contribute generously to the War Fund, since a title is "a tattoo-mark of loyalty" (Hungers 33-34).

At a party at Government House, Samarendra sets in motion his plan to utilise his son Rahoul's research activities to push him into some coveted position. He tells the Chief Secretary, Mr. Sidebottom, a Cantabrian, that his son studied at Cambridge and is gratified to discover that both the Chief Secretary and his son were at St. John's. He informs the Chief Secretary that his
son is striving to harness astral power to wage revolutionised warfare. The brief talk has a vital effect on Rahoul's life, much more than Samarendra expected (Hungrers 37-39).

One day Samarendra offers a copper to a beggar asking for rice. The beggar declines the copper saying, "What good is that, Father? The goddess is gone from the copper bit, it is an empty shrine. The goddess lives nowhere save in a rice of grain." The beggar's words inspire a great idea in Samarendra's mind:

It was a grand vision. India must mobilize for defence. Bengal would grow into a great military bastion. A million soldiers would be needed to hold the thousand mile Eastern Front. They would eat their fill: Millions would be engaged in war production, and they, too, would eat their fill. The grain supply from Burma was now lost. If a fraction of Bengal's rice-yield could be cornered—stupendous task! Anyhow, huge stocks could be purchased at the next harvest, laid up, frozen, till demand exceeded supply and the price level rose (one must eat, whatever the price); then the stock could be slowly released at a huge profit. (Hungrers 40)
Samarendra joins some like-minded persons and builds up the envisioned business (Hungrs 40).

Kunal, Rahoul's brother, who has joined the army seizing the opportunity afforded by the War, says that he is not an idealist like his brother. He has no philosophy of life and the army is just a career to him. However, he sees a deeper significance in the very act for Indians, as he tells his brother:

"Yet, not quite. Believe me, not quite. You see, we must cease to be escapist. Look at this war business. It will be good training for us. We are going to show that we're as good in battle as our proud rulers. We can play their game quite as well. We can rise to a crisis; we are resourceful, we do not fear to . . . Live. We do not fear to live—dangerously." (Hungrs 41)

Rahoul, however, muses:

You could commit yourself to mass murder with a clear conscience only when you were convinced that you would be ridding the world of some pest. In the name of humanity Kunal and others of his generation were called upon to fight the pest in Europe. But the champions of freedom abroad were the eaters of freedom in this land. Kunal seemed
insensitive to that side of the picture.

... (Hungrs 41)

Rahoul has been troubled by misgivings for quite some time. He cannot dismiss the War as nothing but an imperialist adventure. It is likely that it will break out of bounds and give reality to the professed aims of false-hearted politicians, creating out of a world in ruins a new enlightened world order. Indians cannot be detached onlookers of that historical process. This is Rahoul's dilemma, the dilemma of the national movement, the dilemma of every thinking Indian (Hungrs 41-42). Bhattacharya writes:

The national movement was not harassed about England's war situation. Its fight was with England's diehard rulers, not with her people, who, defeated, would face enslavement, adding to the miseries of humankind. The national movement offered co-operation, pledging its full strength to the war effort, in return for recognition of the Indian people's right to freedom. Authority, hating to part with power, promptly answered by clapping into prison a great figure in the national movement who had decried the attempt to drag his people into war that was none of their seeking,
as though they were the humblest of slaves.

(Hungrs 42)

Rahoul's dilemma is further complicated by his research student Prokash, who has left a cyclostyled copy of Jawaharlal Nehru's eloquent statement at his trial in Gorakhpur prison, a banned document. The statement excites Rahoul and releases within him something deep and vital and suppressed. He takes a new interest in Prokash and, after enquiring, learns that his asthmatic father has been jailed for years for his nationalist activities and that the boy is the sole breadwinner for his mother, his widowed sister and her children. He also learns that Prokash himself received an ankle injury in a police lathi charge at a nationalist meeting. Rahoul feels a new interest in Prokash and feels a tenderness for "the brave soldier of the national movement," whom he now sees as "his friend, his comrade, his brother" (Hungrs 43-45).

Rahoul and his wife Monju go out one evening for dinner and dancing at a hotel. Used only to an orthodox and traditional life, Monju has, to please him, learnt to dance and this is to be her first dance in public. However, being a Hindu woman, she is upset because an English soldier winks at her while she is waiting for Rahoul to park their car. She is scandalised to see a Hindu woman with her back completely bare. When she
begins to dance for the first time, her face is pale and her feet drag, but, in course of time, she is strengthened, the self-awareness dropping from her mind, the stiffness from her limbs. She thinks it is great fun. Rahoul, in response, abandons himself to enjoyment. The words of Nehru return to his mind occasionally, but the feel of his sleeping daughter, the news of the grant of a fellowship from Cambridge and the inactive state of the national movement douse his emotional strains and blunt his nationalist urge and he concentrates on his research (Hunger 46-51).

The seashore of Bengal is threatened by the Japanese fleet. Fearing Japanese landings, authority has decided on a scorched earth policy to deny means of communication to the enemy by burning all available boats. Bands of boat-wreckers, accompanied by soldiers, descend on Baruni and seize most of the boats of the village and pay compensation for them. The villagers cannot understand why the Japanese should come to Indian shores. They surmise that greed should be their motive. Boats are, to the people of Baruni, more than limbs. They are their blood and bone, and heart and soul. The villagers cannot survive without their boats, as the peasant cannot survive without his plough-and-kine. The Government agents point out that the
Japanese, if they arrive, will seize their boats without any compensation. The boats are wrecked and the parts put up for sale at cheap rates. But no fisherman or peasant buys a part to use as firewood. So the boat-wreckers set fire to the whole lot. When the boats burn, the fisher-folk cry curse and then pick up fistfuls of ash to take home, and to treasure as "a quenchless heritage of hate" (Hungrs 51-58).

Girish, the grocer of Baruni village, is different from his forefathers who were content to make a living out of the calling. He is "a man of ambition," with "an itch to get on in the world" and "an augury of the new times." He lends money and goods to needy peasants and his capital grows steadily from mounting interest. His great ambition is to open a store in town and, to realise this vision, he denies himself and his kin. However, a miracle seems necessary for the vision to be fulfilled. Suddenly the miracle seems to have arrived in the shape of the boat-wreckers. With the village crippled by the burning of the boats, Girish sees himself having a monopoly on all trade in and out of the village with a boat of his own, but this dream does not come true. One day other Government agents arrive and record his stocks and say that they will buy half of them. A jeep with posters arrives and the
villagers are educated on the potential cruelty of the Japanese invaders and the advisability of selling their stocks of food to the Government as part of the policy of scorching food. Girish perceives his vision of affluence vanish (Hunger 58-61).

One day a stranger comes to Girish's shop enquiring after rice. He represents a company dealing in rice. He offers funds to Girish to buy up all the grain he can with a promise of a commission on all that he buys. Girish's dream is revived. However, Devata cautions the villagers of Baruni not to rush to sell their grain and his word is command in Baruni. He has considered the needs of the fishermen, the landless kisans and the artisans of the village in cautioning the peasants. He has thought of the thousands of villagers uprooted from villages commandeered for airfields and other defence purposes. Having seen the authorities scorch the boats and the food, Devata fears that they would soon scorch the people themselves (Hunger 61-64).

With the Japanese standing firm on the doorstep of Bengal, poised for attack, the Quit India Movement is launched, arguing that freedom will enable India to resist aggression effectively, transforming the nature of the War. But Rahoul knows that the British will not arm Indians or let India's industries be geared to full production. He muses:
Alien leadership, perched proudly on the debris of a dead century, would not win the war only to lose Empire. But while it lived in an old century, it used the tools of the new to destroy the new. It used science to smash science. And with a sudden leap it took the national movement in handcuffs and chains. (Hunners 64–65)

The leaders of the national movement are jailed, provoking a people's revolt, unplanned, unsanctioned by the national movement, a spontaneous flare up of wrath. Watching from his laboratory window, Rahoul sees a burly European sergeant desecrate the tricolour carried by demonstrating youth who try to retrieve the flag non-violently. The police swing lathis and open fire. Losing himself, Rahoul rushes out to hold the flag up. He receives a lathi blow on his leg and crashes down. He is taken to prison, but is freed in the evening. He realises that his liberation is due to his fictitious research on the death ray, fake notes on which he has purposely left on his table to satisfy the curiosity of a student set by the police to spy on him and of whom he has been warned by Prokash, who has now gone underground (Hungers 65–68).

Baruni village too joins the Quit India Movement. Kanu and Kajoli together make the tricolour. Kajoli is
dressed in the three colours of the flag for the flag-salute ceremony, as if she were a living tricolour. Under the aged banyan the entire village makes pronam (salutation) to the flag, led by Devata, who speaks the new words of the national movement, which the village echoes. The Red Turbans (police) come at dawn the next day. They arrest Devata and Kajoli's father. No one in Kajoli's family cries because they have all made their pronam to the flag and are fighters. The village hears of the arrest and gathers near the road out of the village, determined to rescue Devata. The Red Turbans fire a warning volley in the air. This only infuriates the men. As they surge forward to attack the police, Devata calmly steps out of the police van and exhorts them not to betray the flag through violence. He climbs back into the van, which leaves (Hungrs 70-72).

As the van passes the banyan, the police officer sees the tricolour fastened to a root and fires six shots at it, making six holes. The men become frenzied and surge after the van with shouts of hate and fury, with no Devata to hold them back and with Kanu carrying the bullet-ridden flag. Later the men straggle back, with Kanu still carrying the tricolour. He reports that they have burnt the post office five miles away.
Hours later the police return in larger numbers and arrest many of the men and youth of the village, including Kanu and take them away in a truck (Hungrs 72-76).

With her father and her brother gone to jail, Kajoli has to reap their field, though she is unskilled at it, an unaccustomed novice. The traditional work of a woman is at home, but Kajoli has to change to a man's rugged work in the field. It is back-baking work, but Kajoli is not downhearted or defeated. Her younger brother Onu, more of a novice, still tries his best at reaping. To encourage him she transfers armfuls of her own reaping into his lot. Kajoli also takes over her father's responsibility of caring for the kisans who work in their field (Hungrs 77-78).

The storeman relentlessly plies the peasants with persuasive arguments to sell their rice to him, using temptation and terror alternately. But many of the peasants of Baruni, like Kajoli's mother, remember Devata's words and refuse to sell their rice. The storeman tries to tempt Kajoli with the promise of a blue ribbon for her hair and Onu with that of a rubber ball. Both see through his black heart and are determined not to sell him rice since their father too had forbidden it (Hungrs 78-80).
One day, returning to the house for the mid-day meal, Kajoli sees a stranger eating a hearty meal. He is a young man who has been in the same jail as her father, who has sent him. The young man, named Kishore, reports that there was a firing in the prison because the prisoners sang a song of revolt. He has brought a letter for them from Kajoli's father. The letter contains her father's prayer that Kishore, a mill-worker from the city, should marry Kajoli. The girl tidies up and presents herself before Kishore, who is already drawn towards her (Hungrers 81-85).

When Kajoli returns to the reaping in the afternoon, her work slackens because of the "new tenderness in her breast" on account of Kishore. Kishore himself comes to the field. He takes Kajoli's sickle and starts harvesting. But he does not know the right technique because he knows only machines. Onu teaches him the right way to reap. When he has learnt to reap correctly, Kishore declares that Kajoli will never again hold the sickle to reap as long as his arm has strength and his body has breath (Hungrers 85-90).

The imprisonment of her father and her brother has virtually killed Kajoli's laughter:

She, too, had once held the rich gift of laughter in her heart; she, too, could once
laugh out of plain delight, laugh till tears came. But the Evil Thing [the British Government] had killed her young gayness. Gravity was heavy on her face and spirits. . . . she laughed, if ever, only with her lips—half laughed in a strangled way, as though with the threat of a hidden hand upon her throat. (Hungrs 90-91)

However, marriage brings back her laughter:

And now this sudden miracle! The utter abandon of gay, ripe laughter as it spilled out of the hand she gripped over her mouth, the helpless laughter that drew tears to each eye! (Hungrs 91)

The mill-worker Kishore toils with the charka two hours every day for a month to fulfill his heart's fancy of seeing his wife Kajoli wearing a sari out of his spinning. Collecting the sari from the weaver, he is impatient to see her dressed in it and so insists on her putting it on even on the way home. However, he also wishes to buy a city sari, a mill-made one for her. He wishes to take her to the city, show her the sights and take her to the cinema (Hungrs 91-92).

When Kishore tells her that cinema plays show married women picking a fancy for smart chaps other
than their husbands, Kajoli declares that she will never see a cinema play, because she considers it evil. She staunchly believes, according to her tradition, that such a thing can never happen. She also asserts the traditional tenet that a married woman has no hungers left to be filled, except the one big hunger for home, her little hungers belonging to it as the spokes belong to the cart-wheel. When Kishore holds out his feet to her to be washed, she playfully challenges him to wash hers. When he takes her at her word and touches her feet, she springs back as if bitten, drops quickly to her knees, bows low and presses her forehead to his dusty feet, crying "'What sense of fun! You don't care if sin touches me?['] . . ." (Hungers 92-99).

The Government hits back at Baruni village for the burning down of the post office by imposing a collective fine on the village to pay for the new post office. The storeman uses this threat to tempt the villagers to sell rice to him. The peasants do not believe him but, when the tax collector comes to collect the punitive fine, they know it is only too true. In the absence of the village elders, who are all in prison, the storeman becomes the self-appointed trustee of the national movement, though his only loyalty is to his firm of Cheap Rice Limited, and he exhorts the villagers to sell their rice to him (Hungers 99-101).
When the punitive fine is paid and the rice drained from the village, the kisans are unable to buy rice at the country haat (market) because it has no rice. Kishore pleads that their own stocks cannot last till the new crop. However, the mother firmly says that, if they eat, their kisan brethren and their kin shall eat, because the rice is as much theirs, having "grown from the pouring sweat of their chests." Fishermen, craftsmen, uprooted people, all need rice. The mother will not deny rice to anyone because her husband, who is in jail, "would not have eaten while men hungered at his door" (Hungers 102).

Kishore decides to go to the city and find work, determined to work very hard, live frugally and send money to his kin, though it would break his heart to go away from Kajoli, who is pregnant. As he leaves, she gives him her pair of eardrops, a marriage gift from her mother, and her only jewel, to be sold in the city for his shelter and food before he finds work. Two hours later, sitting down to her noon meal, she gives a violent start, slumps on the mud floor and bursts into broken-hearted sobbing. That very instant Kishore lies dying across the railway track, shot by an armed guard posted to protect the special train of His Excellency (Hungers 102-04).
Kunal writes to Rahoul from somewhere in the Libyan desert stating that Indian soldiers have won a great victory over their sense of race inferiority, fighting and defeating white troops in pitched battles against very heavy odds, exploding the white man's bubble in the African air and killing the myth that has been the spine of empires (Hunger 104).

Rahoul, however is concerned about the starvation deaths in Bengal, now growing in number and smashing down upon Calcutta. Authority takes little heed and dismisses press reports as over-dramatisation. The starvation is man-made because there has been no failure of crops and proper rationing could have countered the impact of army purchases. The destruction of country boats, the evacuation of villages and inflation have created the misery. A cold and inhuman authority and widespread corruption have compounded the problem. Rahoul's money order to Kajoli's mother has returned undelivered. He does not know that his earlier letter, with some money enclosed, has been torn up by the postal censor who pocketed the money. Rahoul is worried about Kajoli's family (Hunger 104-07).

Rahoul knows why there is no hunger riot, no angry demand for food: one day he watches a group of destitutes pausing near a cookshop, gazing at the array of eatables
on display in glass cases; an angry young voice suggests breaking the glass and helping themselves to the eatables; but an elderly voice decries the idea because it is dishonest thieving; the old man and two other old men offer the young man pieces of stale bread to assuage his hunger; the young man is moved to remorse and flees; and, the elders salute God because the youngster is saved from the evil in him (Hungers 107-08). Rahoul muses:

Barely a year had passed since these men, or their brethren, had risen in anger against the tyrants who had swept the people's leaders into prison. But they would not rise in revolt that their stomachs could be soothed—a selfish personal end! They would fight and die over a moral issue. But hunger was their fate, an expiation of the sins of past lives. The peasants' hands were manacled with their antique moral tradition. The rice-robbers were safe from peril because of the peasants' tradition. (Hungers 108)

The students at the university are on the edge of revolt. There is a danger that, once out of restraint, they might take up terrorist tools. Rahoul has been urging them against that way and advocating mass action,
in consonance with the common people. To be able to continue to play his part in guiding the student movement, Raboul shields himself with fake notes about the impending discovery of the death ray for the benefit of the spying student and his masters (Hungers 109).

To postpone the impending starvation, Kajoli grows vegetables, conforming to the traditional horticultural practice. All day long she, her mother and Onu go about collecting items of food like shrimps, figs and edible roots. The villagers barter household and agricultural implements for rice. Peasants unwillingly part with cattle they can no longer maintain in return for grain. Peasants sell their lands too, if they are entitled to do so. The traders in cattle and land hide their time patiently till the owner's back breaks and then swoop down to barter. The Battle of Bengal results in a mass migration of the rural population to the city in the fond hope that somehow the city will sustain them (Hungers 109-11).

In her fifth month of pregnancy, Kajoli longs for the early return of her husband. She fears that the Government has thrown him into prison. She dreams of a pink frock for her unborn baby. Having just one sari to wear, she dreads the day when she and her mother may have to, like many others, sleep naked. Red ants attack
and destroy her egg-plants completely. Mangala the cow, driven by extreme hunger, uncharacteristically pulls out Kajoli’s beans creeper and eats it up. The mother uncharacteristically slaps the animal (Hunger 111-14).

Onu has become an expert climber of trees. He can climb on to branches inaccessible to the other boys and pluck figs. As the stock on the trees dwindles, Onu becomes unusually selfish and hoards the inaccessible figs for himself and his family. The other boys, his friends, attack and injure him. Learning that his friends wanted the figs for their little siblings who could eat only figs, Onu shares his harvest with them. Onu perceives the danger to himself in reaching out to the farthest figs. At the same time, however, he is aware of the dire need to pluck those figs (Hunger 114-17).

Kajoli’s mother finds a patch of green pasture for the cow Mangala and grazes her there. She is not willing to sell Mangala for rice. In any case Onu and Kajoli will not let her do so. Even if she does so, they will not eat the rice obtained in exchange for Mangala. She has already removed the major part of the straw thatch of the house to feed Mangala. Leaving Mangala to graze by herself, the mother goes in search of roots. Earlier, on the way out of the village, Mangala stopped before the village store and jerked her head. The mother
understood that Mangala wanted her neckstring of brass bells to be sold for rice. The mother untied the neck string and exchanged the bells for some rice which she tied in a corner of her sari (Hungers 117-20).

Now the mother sees a ragged woman trying to bury her live baby because she cannot feed it. The mother snatches the child and strikes the woman across the face. The mother offers the woman the rice she has, but the woman is not tempted because her baby cannot eat rice. What she needs is money to buy milk for her baby. The mother advises the woman to go to Calcutta city and find work. She also offers the woman her Mangala to sell for money. The woman falls at the mother's feet in gratitude. The mother lifts her up and then walks away, not daring to go near Mangala. She stops and, hailing the woman, gives her the rice in her sari corner also (Hungers 120-24).

On her way back to the village, the mother meets a woman and her young daughter, both dressed gaily. The mother asks if the girl, named Neeri, is to be wed. The woman takes offence at this, abuses the mother, and hurries away with her daughter. Reaching home, the mother sees strangers by the doorstep, strangers from the city. Onu excitedly shows her the sandesh he has been given to eat by a fat city woman, who praises the
beauty of Kajoli. The mother thinks that the fat woman is from a relief society. The fat woman presses a mundesh on the mother, who sits down and eats it. Onu informs her that Kajoli is busy in the kitchen with rice, lentils and ghee. The fat woman offers more rice, money and saris. In return for all this generosity she wishes to take Kajoli with her to become a prostitute (Hunger 125-29).

When the meaning of the fat woman's offer becomes clear, the mother shrieks to her to leave. The fat woman mocks the mother and provokes her further. The mother seizes a stick of bamboo and brandishes it, but Kajoli intervenes. The mother goes into the house and, bringing out the provision brought by the fat woman, throws them out. She also brings out the cooking pot and pours out the half-cooked rice and lentils. The fat woman and her male companion leave, taunting the family (Hunger 128-31). As Onu sobbs for the wasted rice and Kajoli sits with tear-filled eyes, the mother forces herself to vomit the sweet she ate from the fat woman. And then Onu goes towards the fig tree for some figs saying that he will probably drop like a fig from the tree and be killed (Hunger 128-31).

Leaving their house with unutterable agony the family take to the highway leading to Calcutta. They join other destitutes moving in the same direction,
eating cooked roots, seeing vultures feeding on corpses lying by the road, and, watching hundreds of destitutes clinging to the footboards of passing trains. At night they sleep on the roadside, in perpetual fear of jackals, red ants, scorpions and snakes. The mother pins her hope on reaching Rahoul in Calcutta, but Kajoli scorns the idea, saying that, being a rich man, he would have a poor memory and so would not know them (Hungrs 132-39).

Setting out alone in search of roots early in the morning in the meadow, Kajoli is sorely disappointed because the meadow is picked clean of roots. Near a jackfruit tree she hears a groan and sees a groaning woman lying by the tree-trunk, while a jackal eats her body. The jackal walks off on seeing Kajoli. Feeling sick, Kajoli flees towards her mother. The mother comes looking for Kajoli. Going to the jackfruit tree, the mother gets the dying woman a few drops of water to drink. Soon the woman dies. Almost hidden by the woman's body the mother sees a jackfruit sprouting out of the trunk and is overjoyed (Hungrs 139-41).

On their sixth day on the highway, rain lashes them. When the rain stops, Kajoli goes in search of roots. Night descends as she is returning. Seeing a soldier she is reminded of the kindness of several
soldiers before. She tells this soldier that she is hungry. He gives her bread. As she is swallowing the bread, the soldier fondles her face and then her breast. When she has eaten the bread, he gives her more, which she gratefully receives for her mother and her brother. The soldier also gives her two one-rupee coins to buy a sari with. The soldier then seizes her arm and leads her away from the road and to the meadow. Devoid of any feeling, Kajoli lets herself be led by the soldier, who is in need of a woman. He makes love to her, but, when she shrieks and groans, he feels blood against his skin and jerks up frightened and panting. Seeing her bleeding, he checks if she is alive. When she groans again, the soldier leaves all his bread and money with her and flees (Hunger 141-45).

The cry of a jackal makes Kajoli sit up in fright and, seeing the animal, she screams again and again. A terrible pain attacks her womb and she collapses. The jackal gives out a shrill cry on smelling fresh blood. Onu, directed by the fleeing soldier, runs towards Kajoli, praying because of the jackal's cry. He tries in vain to shoo away the jackal which is crouching near Kajoli. Snapping a thin bough from a tree, Onu charges at the animal blindly, yelling loudly. The beast flees. Seeing the mess of blood between the
legs of Kajoli, Onu runs for his mother, assuming in his innocence that Kajoli is dying and not knowing that it is her baby that is dead (Hungrers 145-48).

The offending soldier, in the meantime, driven by remorse at what he has done to the girl, rushes to his camp and persuades an army medical officer leaving for Calcutta by an ambulance truck to go to Kajoli's aid. Captain Banerji has Kajoli carried into the ambulance and sets to work. Onu and his mother arrive. Captain Banerji decides to take Kajoli to a hospital in Calcutta. The mother and Onu accompany the sleeping Kajoli to Calcutta. The ambulance reaches a hospital and Kajoli is carried in. Onu and his mother dismount and Onu goes to sleep on the pavement while the mother watches with hope of a fair future (Hungrers 148-52).

Awakened by the sound of traffic at daybreak, the mother awakens Onu too. They wash at a handpump. Meeting a destitute picking up a banana skin, the mother enquires after food. The man offers the banana skin to Onu. The mother is offended and tells the man that they are not beggars or scavengers. The man offers to take them to a free kitchen. Since the feeding will be done only at noon, the man offers the banana skin again to Onu, who eats it, much to the distaste of his mother, who prefers starvation to foraging in garbage cans (Hungrers 158-60).
The friendly destitute leads Onu and his mother into an alley where there are many other destitutes. Towards noon he leads them to the compound of the newspaper Hindusthan, where the free kitchen for the area is located. He warns that, if they do not cross the massive iron gates, they will get no food. He advises them to go about in the morning searching in the garbage cans for peels, stalks, rotten vegetables and the like to supplement the gruel supplied in the free kitchen. Having no receptacle to receive the rice gruel, the mother receives hers and Onu's in a corner of her sari. The sari is not of sufficient length and her bosom is a little bared, but she has begun to shed her shame. She eats sparingly so that Onu may eat more. The destitutes are so despondent that they don't even react to the air-raid siren (Hunger 161-64).

Monju is awakened by an awful moaning at night and awakens Rahoul. Leaning from the window, Rahoul seeks a woman who is about to give birth. Rahoul tries to get some hospital or other to take her in but every hospital is full. With Monju's help he brings the pregnant woman into the house. Leaving Monju with the woman, Rahoul goes upstairs to bring his mother. However, before they can come down, the woman dies (Hunger 164-68).
Till now Monju has been critical of Rahoul because he has lost all mind for research and has become sad and moping. She has been planning to take him away from the devastation (Hunger 165-66). The death of the pregnant woman changes Monju:

Out of the flame of travail that had consumed one woman a glow quickened in another, an understanding, a humanizing tenderness, so that the creatures of misery were no longer a race apart, soulless and dead—men and women all.

"Excellencies and Hon'bles," said Rahoul later when the night had ended and the corpse-disposal squad had come and gone, "they have killed one more of our menfolk. They shall pay—pay hard for everything."

Monju stared. Behind the livid, excited face she saw a beauty she had missed all these years. She saw her husband's true spirit, his hunger for a happier life for the common man. And she knew that the spirit in him doomed him ever to wasteful unrest and unhappiness. (Hunger 168-69)

Onu watches a batch of bootblacks at work and learns the job. He is determined to work hard and help his
mother and his sister. However, he lacks the capital to set himself up on the pavement as a shoeblack. As he picks up a jam-tin from a garbage can, a dog comes snarling, claiming possession. Onu drops the can and steps back. A bigger boy, seeing this, kicks the dog and snatches the jam-tin from its teeth. The dog attacks him and fights until Onu picks up a stone and whacks it between the ears. The dog slinks away. The big boy has blood on his arm and is panting hard. He offers Onu one side of the jam-tin to lick, "truly an act of self-sacrifice" (Hunger 169-71).

Monju needs Adexcelin for her daughter but it is not available at any chemist's, because it has all gone to the black market because of the new price control. Monju complains to Samarendra who promises to get it. Monju also asks for a cheque to buy rice from the black market for Rahoul's relief centre because the railway wagon has failed to arrive again. She asks him for a big amount. She is in the thick of relief work, helping her husband to run his free kitchen, helping at a milk canteen that doles out milk to under-fours and also helping with a home for foundlings about to open (Hunger 171-73).

Sir Abalabandhu is the prince of the black market. Samarendra admires and envies Sir Abalabandhu, but also holds him in contempt. Sir Abalabandhu had come from
another province and become wealthy in Bengal. Sir Abalabandhu is the brain behind Cheap Rice Ltd. and the man who greases palms to win privileges for the firm. Samarendra extenuates his participation in the venture on the ground that, if he does not trade in rice because of scruples, there were scores of others to take his place (Hungers 173).

Sir Abalabandhu is a pervert who poses as the most genial and considerate person. He is without social conscience, but is known as a man of charity who has made princely donations to the War Fund. His talk is filth, his company agony, yet his friendship is a precious gift not to be thrown away. Samarendra tolerates him because the depraved one will make him richer still (Hungers 175-77).

When Kajoli is discharged from the hospital, the mother tells her the truth about their destitute condition. As Kajoli enters the alley, a middle-aged woman who sells betel-leaf from a stall at the corner observes her. Offering the mother a betel-leaf, she obtains information on Kajoli. The woman extends other kindnesses to them. She hails Kajoli in the evening. She explains that the other corner holds an improvised booth wherein alien soldiers had their photographs taken with an Indian wench on their knees to keep as a memento.
of India. The girls earned two rupees a day for the work. The betel-woman adds that Kajoli cannot work there as only half-caste girls with neat English frocks on are employed (Hunger 177-79).

The betel-woman also tells Kajoli that there is a brothel round the corner where the girls live well, making good money. They are paid sixty rupees and even seventy in advance. They also make good money every day. The woman regrets that Kajoli is wasting in mud and filth. Understanding the truth about the betel-woman, Kajoli keeps away from her, though she pursues and pesters Kajoli (Hunger 180).

Rahoul is concerned not only about the physical aspect of the famine—a physically shattered race will grow up in the villages of Bengal—but also about the inner degradation. At first the famished parents gave whatever food they got to the children but, as hunger hit harder, the finer feelings began to be deadened. Such emotional hardening worries Rahoul (Hunger 180-82).

Rahoul still worries about the fate of the peasant mother at Baruni, Kajoli, Kishore and Onu. He scans several faces on bus and train with hope and fear, searching all the time. Actually he passes Onu one day at a garbage can, but does not recognise the scarecrow of a boy (Hunger 182-83).
Rahoul witnesses a stark case of emotional deadening one day after night fall. White soldiers stand grouped near the military encampment around a young destitute girl, who sits on the roadside under a lamp post, wearing a ragged garment and the scarlet marriage-mark on her brow. When a soldier drops a rupee into her begging-bowl, she rises to her feet, arms folded under her bosom, and stands erect looking skyward. Then, with a strange smile, she unfolds her arms and strips the ragged garment from her breast. After some time she covers herself and sinks to her knees in shame. She repeats this routine every time a rupee is dropped into her bowl. The third time round, however, she is almost in tears. Following her, Rahoul sees that, with the money earned thus, she buys a lot of bread and goes into an alleyway where she distributes the bread to the destitutes who call her "the mother" (Hungers 183-85). Bhattacharya comments:

She had sold her shame, the convention bound moron would so decry her, she had abased the body's sanctity. But Rahoul, walking out of the lane, felt as though he had glimpsed the sanctity of the human spirit, and was dazzled by too much richness and beauty.

That was the streak of light to illuminate the gloom of his heart. (Hungers 186)
Rahoul witnesses a rare instance of the richness of the human spirit. An old man, who has been feeding at the relief centre for two weeks, insists on surrendering his ticket because he can now live without food for some time and can move about and beg and find food-scrapes. He begs Rahoul to give his place to someone whose need is greater than his. This, he says, will give him great joy (Hunger 186-87).

One day Onu begs in the street. A white soldier leaving a cinema house looks at him with compassion, smiles, speaks in his own language, passes a gentle hand over the boy's dusty mop of hair and gives him a half-rupee piece. Dazed, Onu goes towards a cheap cookshop to buy rice. However, he changes his mind and goes to a back-street temple. He buys flowers and a butter lamp for the deity with the money given by the white soldier, offers them to the deity and prays that a Japanese bomb may hurt him because that will ensure a safe and comfortable life in hospital for him (Hunger 187-90). Bhattacharya describes:

"Mother," the prayer flowed fervent out of his depths, "I ask naught else from thee. Mother, I only ask this much: let a Japanese bomb hurt me, Mother. Then the motor-wagon with one red stripe down and another across will come and pick me up and take me to sick-
hospital. They will give me an iron bed to lie on, Mother, and a clean piece of cloth to put on, and, may be, a blanket to wrap myself in against cold, and food—all the rice I can eat, Mother. And I can sleep my fill, Mother, and even if it rains hard I'll not get wet, because of the roof over my head, and there will be no need to walk and walk and pick from muck-heaps and fight the angry dogs, but I can lie down, being hurt by a Japanese bomb, with a doctor to care for me, a doctor to wash my blood with medicine and put a fever-stick in my armpit to know the heat. And let the wound take long to heal, Mother; for then I can stay long in sick-hospital, a bed under me and a blanket over me and rice for my mouth, as if I am a king. Mother, I ask naught else of thee, Mother only let a Japanese bomb drop from the sky and hurt me. [sic] Mother." (Hungers 190)

Bhattacharya's comment on the significance of Onu's bizarre prayer is significant:

Onu had moved away from the eager-hearted boy who had lived for his kin, strong, protective, for their sake. The problem
of his own survival now absorbed him. His defeated spirit pulled his emotions to itself. And his introvert emotions weakened his fighting power. It was a vicious cycle.

(Hungers 190)

The mother is nearing death and incapable of eating the poor food Kajoli and Onu provide, begging in the streets and picking in the garbage. Moreover, she urgently requires shelter from the winter. So, Kajoli makes her grim decision to sell herself. After all, her body was defiled on the highway. It would be defiled over and over again if mother's life could be saved at that price. The agent has offered eighty rupees for her body. The money would see mother through for a year. When times brighten she could send mother and Onu back to the village to the land. Father might return from prison, but not Kanu and her husband because the youngsters would be hanged as she gathered from the betel-woman who, in turn, gathered it from her customers and the newspaper hawkers. She herself, however, would never return home, because the very shadow of her would be defilement (Hungers 191).

Kajoli recalls her kind and loving husband and prays that she could have him for husband in the lives to come. If this boon is granted, she has no need of Heaven (Hungers 191-92).
Kajoli speaks to the betel-woman and gets the money in advance promising to come later in the night. That night, after mother has gone to sleep, she ties the wad of notes to the corner of a piece of sacking which they used as washcloth and places it under mother's head. She bids an emotional farewell to her sleeping mother, who responds emotionally in sleep (Hungers 192).

For her part the mother has decided to take leave of Kajoli and Onu. That morning she saw a man who had hanged himself. This prompted her to die undefeated while she could, without being a burden to her children. She has decided to drown herself in Mother Ganges. Early next morning she finds Kajoli missing. Assuming that the girl has gone to ease herself, the mother blesses Onu and leaves. Unwilling to let her worn sari be lost with her, she leaves it behind and goes away covering herself with the old sacking. The wad of notes touches her skin and she thinks it is some useless scrap. She reaches a bridge over the Ganges, climbs over the railing and jumps into the river (Hungers 194).

As Kajoli walks shuffling on the street, she hears newspaper vendors announcing a hunger strike by the inmates of Dehra Dun jail-house, with an old patriot fasting unto death. Kajoli learns that it is her dadu
Devata. She recalls all that he meant to her and his exhortations, and she is ashamed of her near-surrender to evil. Hearing the betel-woman say that there is good commission to be earned by selling newspapers, Kajoli walks towards the offices of the Hindusthan. She has decided that she and her brother will lead an honest life by vending newspapers. Telling the betel-woman that she will return her money soon, Kajoli slaps her and goes into the newspaper office (Hungrs 194-98).

Late one night Samarendra receives a telegram from the Defence Department saying that his son Kunal Basu has been listed as missing in action. His wife suspects the worst but he dupes her saying that it is just some bad business news. She does not care because she has no need of riches and is content with the old simple way of life. But she prays that her sons should be kept from harm's way. After she has left, Samarendra slips into bed and sobs like a child. He hopes that Kunal has been captured by the enemy and so is out of danger. Samarendra longs to speak to Rahoul for reassurance, but his older son is not home. Perhaps he is sleeping in his office at the relief centre as he sometimes does. Three hours later Rahoul phones Samarendra to say goodbye because he has been arrested. Samarendra sobs like a child again (Hungrs 198-200).
Samarendra is crushed by the futility of his entire life lived for the happiness of his two sons who never really belonged to him, but, instead, to his old father. Just then he hears on the radio, switched on by a servant, the announcement that, as part of the New Year's Honours, he has been conferred the title of Companion of the Indian Empire. Instead of rejoicing, he sobs because "when the bliss for which he had hungered for so many years came to him at last, it hit him like a curse, an evil thing!" (Hungers 200-01).

The manager of Cheap Rice Ltd. phones to say that a big eagerly-expected deal is about to come off and he needs immediate advice from Samarendra since Sir Abalabandhu is not in town. Samarendra's tear-filled eyes sparkle for a moment and then he falls dead (Hungers 202-03).

Rahoul is not surprised when the police van comes for him. For the past two months he has done no work in the laboratory. He has also been speaking with bitter smouldering rage to the students, condemning the imperial tyranny and inhumanity of British rule over India. He has openly called upon the British to quit India. Allowed to speak to his family on the phone, Rahoul says good-bye to his father and to his wife. Monju says that she too will follow him soon, adding, "I am not the
silly thing I used to be, you know that." Rahoul is
proud of Monju because she is free from misgivings,
completely fearless (Kungras 202-03).

The change that has come over Rahoul is complete:
Rahoul was completely self-possessed.
Somewhere on the long, winding path of the
years he had shed his fear of suffering and
loneliness. What happened to him as an
individual did not matter. He was indifferent
too, towards his captors, and his mind was
without hate, without anger, in a nirvane
[sic] of passionlessness...

He was alone and in enemy hands. Yet he
was far from alone. He was a ripple in the
risen tide of millions for whom prisons enough
could never be devised, nor shackles forged.
And strong exultation burned in his eyes and
a strange intense look of conquest kindled in
his face as he gave his voice to the united
voices [of the other prisoners]:
The more they tighten the chains, the more
the chains loosen!

Change is inevitable and prevalent throughout the
novel. Devata is actively engaged in bringing about
social change through village reconstruction and by
participating in the freedom struggle. He has to pay a heavy price for it. Rahoul escapes change temporarily by going to Cambridge. Kunal changes over to the army from civilian life, but it is only for the sake of adventure and career with little emotional involvement.

The War and the national movement gradually impinge on Rahoul's consciousness. He starts with sympathy and moves by steps to active involvement, temporary incarceration, total dedication and decisive arrest. Rahoul's wife starts with indifference to the national movement but moves on to total commitment and dedicated service even at the threat of incarceration.

Imperial interests play havoc with the lives of the rural poor. Their boats are scorched and so are their crops. Profiteers contribute their mite to creating an artificial famine leading to mass migration to the city, only to jump from the frying pan to the fire. Destitution and dishonour seek out the villagers and accompany them to the city.

The crackdown on the national movement, incarcerating most males, hastens the sufferings of the rural populace. Families have to be run without the head. Fields have to be cultivated without men. Honour has to be guarded without the protection of the menfolk. The flight to the city is fraught with its own dangers. Human beings seek out and eat roots like animals. A woman tries to
bury a living but starving baby. The transformation to brutes is almost complete.

Finally the spirit is so defeated that a girl exposes her breasts for money to buy bread for her starving people. Kajoli herself takes an advance to sell her body. She is saved from perdition at the last moment by the recollection of Devata and his words. She steps out confident of a honourable future with her brother.

It is not as if only what is new or modern is good and desirable. There is virtue in tradition and in the native traditions and conventions ingrained in the people's psyche, particularly in the countryside. The rural people are good, noble, simple, courteous, charitable, morally upright, selfless and sympathetic, capable of any degree of self-sacrifice and the highest standards of self-respect. All these admirable qualities are illustrated in the course of the novel.

So Many Hungers! has a galaxy of characters of various shades—from the noble Kajoli to the depraved Sir Abalabandhu. These characters contribute to the pattern of clash of contrasts in the novel. Rao reads a significant contrast of characters between Rahoul and Kunal, Kajoli and Monju and Kajoli's mother and Rahoul's mother (54). There is also an inexplicable contrast between Devata and his only son Samarendra.
In *Indian Writing in English*, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar says that *So Many Hungers!* is "an impeachment of man's inhumanity to man" and also "a dramatic study of a set of human beings trapped in a unique tragic predicament" (414). To break out of the trap the characters have to change their very mind set, the starkest instance being Kajoli's decision to sell her body. Harish Raizada, in "Bhabani Bhattacharya: Novelist of Social Ferment," points out that, in *So Many Hungers!*, "juxtaposed with this tale of man's hunger for food is the hateful sight of man's callous greed for wealth" (160). Samarendra Basu's manipulations on the Stock Exchange illustrate this point. In *Major Indian Novelists*, A. Venkata Reddy says that the novel not only describes "the gruesome physical aspect of hunger," but also brings out "the moral implications of human hunger for food" and points out how "the finer feelings began to be deadened" when hunger pinched, for instance, a starving woman continuing to eat food at a free kitchen with her child dead in her lap (63).

In "Bhabani Bhattacharya's "So Many Hungers!": An Affirmative Vision of Life," K.K. Sharma points out that when Kajoli, Onu and their mother trudge their weary way to Calcutta, they get encouragement and hope even from other miserable, destitute people because
they are human beings and "new wicks of strength" burn in Kajoli (206). In "The Theme of Hunger in Bhattacharya and Markandaya," Ramesh K. Srivastava points out that hunger changes the usually generous Onu so that he refuses to share the figs he has plucked equally with Robi, but, later, when he learns that Robi's kid brother can digest only figs, he becomes generous (226).

In "Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'So Many Hungers!': A Study," G.S. Balarama Gupta says that Rahoul "grows with the progression of the novel in his sensitivity and nobility, absorbs violent shocks, bears the agony of conflicting loyalties, but yields only to his inner call, and so has the courage to end up as a political prisoner" (212). Gupta also points out that Rahoul's wife Monju, "bred on the lap of luxury, slowly comes to realize her husband's greatness and follows his footsteps" (215). In Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction, G.P. Sarma points out how the intellectual Rahoul is dragged into politics by his subtle conscience and, "plunging deep into the movement, he finds himself locked up in the British Jail" (234). In "Nationalism in Bhabani Bhattacharya's So Many Hungers! and Shadow from Ladakh," T. Asoka Rani points out how Kajoli decides to sell her body to save her family from hunger, but, upon learning of the hunger strike undertaken by her
Sadhu Devata in Dehra Dun, changes her mind and escapes from the clutches of the procuress (89). Rani also points out how Rahoul's wife, Monju, who initially opposed his getting involved in the freedom struggle, gradually changes until, when he has been arrested, she says that she too will go her husband's way soon because "I am no longer the silly thing I used to be" (89).

In "An Approach to Bhabani Bhattacharya's So Many Hungers!," K. Venkata Reddy says that the central theme of So Many Hungers! is "the ultimate triumph of the human spirit over the demeaning circumstantial powers" (47). In "Self and Society: A Study of Bhabani Bhattacharya's So Many Hungers!," S.P. Swain says, "The nobility of the self in spite of all sufferings lends an epic dimension to the self, be he Rahoul or Kajoli. Suffering and hunger ennobles and strengthens the self . . ." and adds that the novel "has affirmed the very sanctity of human self and its epic dimension, which cannot be obliterated and crushed by evil forces or a hostile milieu . . ." ([5]-13).
Note

1 All subsequent references to the text of Krishna Chandra’s novel So Many Hungers! will be indicated by Hungers, followed by the number(s) of the relevant page(s) in parentheses, the text used being the Vision-orient Paperbacks edition of 1978.