Chapter 4
Orthodoxy versus Reason

Change—deliberately planned change—is the very foundation of the story of Bhattacharya's novel He Who Rides a Tiger: a kamar changing into a Brahmin, a destitute pimp changing into a dispenser of divine favours and a demizen of a brothel-house changing into the divine Mother of Sevenfold Bliss. The opening chapter of He Who Rides a Tiger underlines the tyranny of traditional caste prejudice and the efforts of the blacksmith Kalo to overcome it. While repairing the cracked pitcher of an aged Brahmin priest, Kalo wonders how to name his forthcoming baby. The Brahmin priest suggests Obhijit if it is a boy and Chandra Lekha if it is a girl and adds, "We gentlefolk give that kind of name to our sons and daughters. Dark-minded folks of your caste have a fancy for Haba and Goba, Punti and Munni . . . " (Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger 6).

In deference to the wishes of his late wife, Kalo is determined that Lekha should go to the Convent School though he is only a low caste kamar. When he takes her to school on the first day he stops fifty yards from the gate lest the gateman see him and identify Lekha as a kamar's daughter. Some wicked schoolmates mock her at school because her father is a blacksmith. Lekha
slaps them but they join together and beat her up and tear her clothes (Tiger 9-12).

Though Lekha is at the top of her class in every test the girls at school are cold and aloof because of her humble caste. Even the people of her own station are critical, saying, "A kamar girl puts on the feathers of learning! A sparrow preens as a parrot!" (Tiger 15). At the height of the Bengale Famine, Kalo sets outs for Calcutta to find employment, but lands in a jail (Tiger 34).

Kalo's faith in "the truth-seeking eye of the law" is shaken when a magistrate asks him "Why did you have to live?" and sends him to jail for stealing a few bananas (Tiger 34). His hope for the future is shattered when his cell-mate, B-10, tells him that he won't find work without references in Calcutta city, particularly when he carries the strong scent of the jailhouse (Tiger 38). Finally B-10 points to him the only available road for the future: "We are the scum of the earth. The boss people scorn us because they fear us. They hit us where it hurts badly— in the pit of the belly. We've got to hit back" (Tiger 39). B-10 proves to him how low human values can dip during harsh times by telling him how a man called Rajani one day offered him a pimp's job on good pay if he could persuade the
five women in his group to sell their bodies in order to save their kinfolk from a terrible doom and thereby attain glory (Tiger 40). B-10 also suggests to Kalo to disguise himself as a yogi with great spiritual power since such people always receive generous alms (Tiger 42). B-10 also says that there are several tricks "to make a milch-cow of people who have large funds of faith as well as cash," provided Kalo, who has the appropriate appearance, wears a sacred thread and claims to be a Brahmin priest (Tiger 43-44).

When Kalo, who has found work as a pimp in Calcutta, sends Lekha twenty rupees, her Old Aunt insists that it is all because of the gods and so she spends lavishly on offerings at the temple because the wheel has turned (Tiger 50-51). When a fat middled-aged lady from town comes to take Lekha to Calcutta to her 'injured' father lying in a hospital, Old Aunt promises to go to the temple and continue puja and prayer till deep in the night (Tiger 62-64).

After having rescued Lekh, irrationally feels that she is that is the social idea, "the (Tiger 70-71). To escape from deny and also eradicate "the v been bred," and he has "to cut give up his inheritance" (Tiger
what Kalo decides to do, carrying out a suggestion made by B-10 to hit back at the boss folk (Tiger 76).

Kalo transforms himself into a Brahmin priest, wears yellow cloak and skull cap, a rosary on his neck and sits with his legs crossed on a striped tiger skin under a banyan tree chanting "Namo Shivaya." Lekha sits beside him and helps him. She explains that Shiva visited her father in a dream, told him where he lay buried, and asked him to pour water on the spot until he rose (Tiger 77-78). Soon a large crowd gathers to watch the coming of Shiva (Tiger 79-80). To do this Kalo has to throw off the heavy yoke of his past, flout three thousand years of his yesterdays and make himself rootless (Tiger 81). Bhattacharya clinically records the change that Kalo has undergone:

He had devised the coming, aware of the blasphemy he was committing, aware that his abiding faith was ancestral, ingrained. Let him pass a shrine and his folded palms would lift involuntarily to his brow. Prayer came from his heart whenever Lekha had been ill or he had sent the priest at the local temple the customary libation of fruits and sweets and cash. To think that he could be deceitful about a god's image! A man who
was setting out to be god's own priest! But the rebel had been stern and implacable. The rebel was reason and justice, and they had transformed Kalo. The Brahmin masquerade was a step toward a basic reincarnation. (Tiger 81)

Kalo has created a god and a legend which would pass from generation to generation. Lekha, contaminated by the air of a brothel, is to have the aura of sanctity. After all, it is for her that Kalo has set out on this bold path. The original Kalo would prefer to be a small-town smith, toiling from dawn to midnight for a fistful of rice for himself and one for Lekha. But, now, that is no longer possible. He rides a lie as if it were a tiger which he cannot dismount, lest it pounce on him and eat him up (Tiger 83-84).

Kalo explains to his daughter how he effected the miracle, following B-10's advice. He buried a Shiva stone with dried grams underne water on the spot. The water. The swollen grams pushed up t till the miracle occurred (Tig hit back at the boss people,

He was scum no long pillar of society!

seers of gram. Har
avenge himself. A smith reincarnated a Brahmin. A convict and harlot-house procurer become a master of a temple, placing the hand of benediction on the bowed heads of pious folks. So had the Wheel of Karma turned.

(Tiger 85)

To tackle the owner of the site of the temple, Kalo cleverly exploits the traditional regard for a Brahmin priest among Hindus, forcing the hardware merchant to shed his pride, bow deeply and touch his Brahminic feet. Step by step Kalo puts the fear of god into the man, insulting him, terrorising him and appealing to his Hindu instincts until he tamely parts with the deed (Tiger 86-88).

Kalo employs an aged pujari since he knows neither ritual nor mantra. Next he adopts the Brahmin name of Mangal Adhikari, suggested by the name of a cine star. Kalo's transformation is complete and he is fully ready to carry on his enterprise of fraud (Tiger 88-89).

A rich stock-broker named Motichand seeks Lekha's advice because he cannot take a decision in the present condition of the market. Kalo gives Lekha a veiled glance full of warning lest the request be a trap. Unable to understand her father's meaning, Lekha tells Motichand "Buy ... sell ... buy ... sell."
Motichand follows Lekha's advice though it goes against market sense. At the end of the day Motichand is left with a huge profit. He is convinced that Lekha has "the gift of the inner eye." The next day Motichand arrives at the shrine and offers to complete the temple at his own expense (Tiger 91). Kalo now has his revenge, as Bhattacharya narrates:

His [Kalo's] eyes hardened. 'They're paying. They touch our low-caste feet. They pray to a god who is no god. What expiation could ever cleanse their souls? They're polluted, fallen. They're doomed—for many lives to come.' He paused, with a sudden amused look. His voice changed. 'Yesterday a man came and touched my feet humbly. Lekha, he was no other than the magistrate who sent me to prison, the magistrate who asked, 'Why do you have to live? Why does your daughter have to live?['] (Tiger 91-92)

Lekha, however, does not share his exultation. She is worried about where all this will end. She says that the lies press heavy on her heart. However, she offers no resistance by word or action. Though he is rich, he cannot overcome the kamar habit of thrift. Bamni the cook disapproves of it. The pujari's wife mocks her husband's loyalty to Kalo. But the pujari is certain
that Kalo's heart is true. Arguing backwards, the pujari believes that Kalo must have earned a fund of merit in past lives (Tiger 94).

Kalo and Lekha have to pay a price for their success. Lekha is perpetually sad and can have no companions of her age to relieve her sadness. Kalo is lonelier than he has ever been. He has hurdled class boundaries only to find that he must move only among high-caste people for whom he feels no warmth. In the circumstances it is better to avoid them, to avoid all social contact, lest the kamar peep through the Brahmin mask (Tiger 94).

Kalo suggests that Lekha go back to school, but she says that she is too old for it, as she has grown twenty years older than her age. He buys a radio set for her and extols its virtues, but she shows no interest in it. His problems baffle him. He wishes that he had found some honest way of living. He banishes his weakness by reflecting that it was not just a question of a living but also of revenge and the temple was the best means (Tiger 95). He muses:

Let them pray to a false god. Let them seek benediction from a kamar. And let their women, limbs draped in jewels and chastity, bow down to a girl who had almost fallen.

(Tiger 95)
The Brahminic role is not easy. Having always worked hard, he cannot pass the endless idle hours. His hands ache for the touch of the tools of his trade. He sets up a smithy in the attic but has to give it up because it is sure to give him away. Time weighs heavily on his hands (Tiger 96-97).

The day of the inauguration of the completed temple is Kalo's day. He is superb. He is a figure of dignity and cool assurance. He has personality, strength, poise. He is the man to help stem the tide of skepticism and irreligion which is rising everywhere. Kalo is aware of his elevation in the public eye and is happy. The elite of the city, the people of wealth, power and prestige are anxious to give him the hand of friendship. He can meet any of them as an equal. He is transported and transformed (Tiger 98).

When the guests are leaving, Motichand brings a friend and introduces him as Jogesh Mitra, "a very big man in the jute business." The words ring a bell in Kalo's mind. Kalo looks stricken. Motichand advises him to rest. Jogesh thinks that his face frightened Kalo. Since Jogesh Mitra could not hand over his cheque to Kalo, Lekha receives it with due gratitude (Tiger 100-02).

Kalo is miserable. His house of cards has toppled. Jogesh Mitra was the man who would have destroyed Lekha.
Kalo has forgotten the face but he still remembers the harlot-house woman's description of the rich customer as "a very big man in the jute business" (Tiger 67). Kalo can be easily squashed. He is in the power of the enemy and must be wary. No one may recognise the procurer of the brothel. They will never associate a Brahmin priest with a low-born procurer. In any case common sense tells him that, since he is riding a tiger, he must keep on riding and not dismount lest it eat him up. Kalo fears that Lekha may see the man when he comes again. However, he learns that she has met him and has shown no reaction or recognition. Kalo is relieved (Tiger 102-04).

The lies still press heavy on Lekha's chest. She cannot share the excitement of her father, who believes that he is avenging himself and her. He calls it his battle though she cannot understand it. She knows of the privations he suffered, his thieving and his jail sojourn. She remembers how, at the peak of the famine, one day, she tried to steal a pumpkin from the children untouchable quarters but was prevented by an old hag who asked her to come back for it when it would be ripe for plucking. It was stealing all the same. He has told her how the prison authorities gradually turn a convict into a rebel and a diehard, determined to attack and avenge (Tiger 104-08).
Lekha agrees with her father's impulse of revolt but is confused about his method. For the first time in his life this man possesses power and riches. He owns Shiva himself. Tradition and faith ensure the deference of the elite for him. But their faith only lands them in sacrilege. How could they attain redemption from the sin of praying to a dead stone? (Tiger 108–09).

There is a new hardness in Kalo, even toward his daughter. He loves his money now much more than in his days of hard work and meagre earnings. Having broken the myth of caste superiority, he bases his survival on the same myth of Brahminic superiority. One day he curses an old destitute for daring to touch him—just like a true Brahmin priest, but comes to his senses when Lekha protests. Then he speaks to the destitute of the equality of all men. He even goes on to give him employment as a gardener upon learning that he is a kamar like himself. He asks Lekha to call Viswanath uncle and to bow to him, but, two days later, he tells her to keep her distance from him because they are always being watched. She observes that Kalo actually overdoes his Brahminic superiority and rudeness (Tiger 109–12).

Kalo is unable to ascertain if Jogesh Mitra is the jute baron who would have destroyed Lekha, but it made no difference. Kalo's fight was not with an individual but with the life that
made such individuals possible. He was avenging himself by forging perdition for all who were nurtured in that life, perdition from which there could be no expiation, ever. This was not going to be the sole false temple in the great city. Others must be installed, and true temples put into shade by false ones with their aggressive splendour. (Tiger 112).

The splendour is to be based mainly on elaborate ritual, since what prevails is only the outward form of religion, empty within. His temple rings with chants and gongs. Wealthy people with no time or heart for prayer and penance give willingly for ritual, to earn merit by proxy. Several ceremonies are commissioned. There is a schedule for milk baths for Shiva (Tiger 112-15).

The gardener Viswanath creates a problem by treading on the toes of the merit-seekers paying for the milk bath. He cannot get over the memory of his three-year-old grandchild Meenu dying of hunger. The milk used for Shiva's bath usually flows into a reservoir. The reservoir is emptied everyday, its sacred contents being taken to the Ganges and dumped with prescribed ritual. Viswanath regards this as deplorable when thousands of children are dying in Calcutta city. So he collects the milk and, after boiling it, distributes
it to destitute babies in an alley. Kalo dismisses Viswanath, but Lekha defends the old man's action. Kalo ruminates on this and decides to defend Viswanath's action after verifying its veracity. Viswanath lauds Kalo's Brahminic heart. Kalo laughs at the ignorance of Viswanath (Tiger 116-22).

The sponsors of the milk baths raise a hue and cry because the used milk is not dumped in the Ganges, but Kalo browbeats them, exploiting their avarice and hypocrisy and their mutual clash of interests (Tiger 123-33).

The Temple Board threatens to rake up the question of the milk. But Kalo calls on Motichand, who offers to persuade the members of the Board to approve of what Kalo does because Kalo knows the real nature of Motichand and his secret longing for Lekha (Tiger 133-39).

Kalo often thinks of Lekha's marriage. The problem is that he will have to find a suitable Brahmin boy because Lekha sits with him on the tiger's back (Tiger 141-43).

On the day of B-10's release from the jailhouse, Kalo goes to the jail with Lekha. They travel by First Class. Kalo buys a bunch of bananas and places it on the side-table. The two other passengers in the compartment are reading newspapers. So Kalo takes his
savings bank account from his pocket and reads it. He still does not understand why Lekha insisted on seeing the jail. Kalo and Lekha receive B-10 when he emerges from the jail (Tiger 144-50).

Kalo and Lekha learn that B-10 is educated but worked as a motor mechanic by profession until he became involved with the destitutes out of conviction and sympathy. For the first time in a long time Lekha laughs in his company and participates in the conversation freely, as Kalo notes. B-10 still maintains that he is of the convict caste though Kalo is almost sure that he is a Brahmin by birth (Tiger 150-54).

A procession of destitutes passes by, clamouring for food, watched by the people in the temple. Old Viswanath detaches himself from the spectators and joins the procession, not heeding Kalo's call to him to stop. Kalo says that Viswanath will have to be dismissed this time, because he has joined the procession which demands jail for the rice profiteers. Lekha defends Viswanath. But Kalo reveals that Sir Abalabandhu, one of the principal patrons of the temple, made his fortune from rice. B-10 is still restless as before. When Kalo asks him his name he says that it should be Biren (Tiger 154-57).
Biten goes back to his mechanic's job in Calcutta. He recalls his only sister Purnima, her love for a non-Brahmin youth named Basav, her forced marriage to a widower with grandchildren, Purnima accusing him of letting her down, her departure with her husband, her subsequent suicide, Basav's anger, Biten's renunciation of his Brahminic heritage by breaking his sacred thread, and, his subsequent flight from home to Calcutta (Tiger 158-63).

Lekha recalls how Biten had declined Kalo's offer of a partnership in the temple because, one day, there will be a crisis. She recalls Uncle Viswanath's determination to join the hunger marchers after he was dismissed from the temple. Biten says that not all the hunger marchers are destitutes. Some of them are students and clerks. Volunteers join it. The marches are organised and monitored by a Committee. He also speaks of the dedicated Quit India prisoners with their patriotism and nationalism. He describes a hunger strike in the prison, in which the women inmates also joined. Lekha is finally convinced of his principle: "The way of struggle is the true way; the struggle, first of all, against fear" (Tiger 166-69).

One Sunday Biten takes Lekha to a banned nationalist meeting in a park. They see several speakers being arrested. They also see a cavalry charge on the crowd,
which responds by demanding food spiritedly. Lekha wants to press her forehead to Biten's feet and worship him (Tiger 169-71).

Kalo has obtained a Brahmin horoscope for Lekha and several offers have come in. But the match-maker tells Kalo that tongues are wagging that Lekha is seen too often in the company of Biten. Kalo knows the nobility of Biten, his wisdom and his strength of purpose. But he has to think of Lekha's future too. He speaks to Lekha about it. She bluntly tells him that she does not care about gossip and that she has had enough of the gilded cage. She also tells him that she trusts Biten. He recalls to her mind the beastliness she encountered in the brothel. She is shaken but walks away (Tiger 172-74).

Kalo realises that perhaps Lekha wishes to marry Biten. But that is not possible because Biten will refuse to wear the Brahminic thread. That will mean the ruin of Kalo and his Brahminic priesthood in the temple. All that he has built up will vanish like a dream. Lekha and Biten will have nothing but poverty to share after that. He decides to plead with Lekha. Feeling humiliated, he drags himself to her room. He sees her sobbing inside and turns away (Tiger 175-77).

The next morning Kalo calls on Biten at his lodge.
He gives his consent to Biten's marriage with Lekha. He suggests that the temple will keep them happy. But Biten says that he will have nothing to do with the temple. He doubts if revenge was Kalo's only motive in deceiving the people. Kalo now pleads that he can marry Lekha only to a Brahmin, true or false, in order to keep up the fraud of the temple. Biten objects to continuing the deception and making him a party to it. He says that, in that case, Lekha will have no respect for him. She may have made herself a Brahmin girl for the sake of her father, but she remains untouched in her heart. He asserts that Kalo's riches do not make Lekha happy. Kalo pleads that Lekha's unhappiness is due to her dark days which make her seek safety first. Biten challenges the view. Kalo leaves, asking Biten to make up his mind in a few days (Tiger 181-84).

Biten meets Lekha and asks her to tell him all the misery she has undergone because her father told him not to ask her about it. She hangs her head and sits close to tears. Biten pulls her into his arms and holds her close. She is frozen for some moments. Then she cries, beats him madly, pushes him away and flees from him. Rushing into her room, she bangs the door shut. Biten recognises the horror in her face as the horror he saw in Purnima's face. He leaves the temple
and the lodge and disappears (Tiger 184-87).

When her hysteria ends, Lekha realises that, when Hiten pulled her into his arms, her mind took her back to the brothel in Calcutta and her struggle to save her honour, ending with her vomiting. She is sorry that she has spoiled everything (Tiger 187-89).

One evening Lekha sees a near-naked pot-bellied boy foraging in a garbage can. Going down to him she learns that he was left behind when the soldiers took his mother away. He has no name. Lekha takes him into the house and bathes him. After the bath she drapes him in a scarf of her father's (Tiger 190-92).

Returning to the house, Kalo befriends the little boy and shows concern for him. It is clear that Kalo approves of the boy. The boy is also not afraid of Kalo. After putting the boy to bed in Lekha's room, Kalo says that Lekha's mother spoke to him and called the boy Obhijit. So they agree that the boy will be called Obhijit (Tiger 194).

All of a sudden Lekha finds herself the cynosure of all eyes. There has been a glittering write-up on her in the Swadesh. A photographer has come to photograph her in several poses, with orders from "high quarters" and he insists on a picture that will reflect her spirit. Several individuals have come to the temple—a hoary-headed mendicant, a bhairabi and a handsome young man.
in a Chrysler car—hailed her as the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss, fallen at her feet and chanted the same verse: "Thou art the secret breath in all created beings/Hail to thee, Mother, and hail, and hail, hail!". Lekha is shocked and bewildered and shaken. Her dedication to the temple was just an impulsive reaction to the darkness in her. Now she feels that she has wronged Biten and acted melodramatically. He will never forgive her or return to her. She wonders if she is a freak. But a dream and its aftermath convince her that she is a normal woman. She longs to meet Biten again and tell him all that has happened to her. But here she is, deified as the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss! (Tiger 195-99).

Obhijit learns quickly with his ears though he struggles with the Bengali letters. Kalo wishes to teach him the blacksmith's art. The cookwoman Bamni one day shows Lekha bread hidden under the mattress of Obhijit. But Obhijit never touches the bread. They throw it away. The next day again there is bread hidden under the mattress. Lekha speaks to Obhijit and points out that there is no need to hide the bread under the mattress. It is clear that it is a sickly habit from his immediate past and he needs to be cured of it.

One day the pujari's wife curses Obhijit for peering into her kitchen as if he were an untouchable. Bamni reports this to Lekha. The next day Lekha sends for
the pujari's wife and offers her a bowlful of a new variety of curry. She asks Obhijit to carry the bowl to the kitchen of the pujari's wife. She also insists on the woman telling her later how the curry tasted. Following Obhijit, the woman tries to stop him short of her kitchen. But Obhijit resolutely completes his mission as directed. The pujari's wife dare not throw a tantrum lest her husband lose his job. Answering his questions, Lekha assures Obhijit that no one will dare beat him or call him unclean one and that he can go anywhere. The next morning no bread is seen hidden under his mattress. Obhijit is cured. He is free of his past with its taboos and denials. Because of this liberation he is also free of his haunting fear of hunger. He has changed into a normal child (Tiger 201-05).

One day the manager of Biten's lodge brings a letter addressed to Bikash Mukherji. So it is clear that Biten is a Brahmin. Now Kalo sees that Biten, though a Brahmin, refused to wear the sacred thread even at the cost of losing the girl he loved, whereas he, a blacksmith posturing as a Brahmin, would not let his daughter marry the man she loved, lest their caste be 'desecrated' and their posturing ended (Tiger 206).
The pujari’s wife spreads the word that Obhijit is an untouchable. The devotees are scandalised. Motichand comes often to the temple nowadays and has installed a phone there so that he can combine devotion and business. His eyes are always upon Lekha. He dreams of possessing her one day. One day he suggests to Kalo to send away Obhijit, because the people object to his low birth. Kalo is adamant. Motichand offers to change the popular attitude for the sake of Lekha because he can’t let her tender feelings be hurt. A day or two later the match-maker brings a proposal of marriage from Motichand. Kalo, holding his temper, says that Lekha is not good enough for Motichand (Tiger 206-09).

As the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss, Lekha has a new glory but she also has to sit and listen and be deaf to pleadings and prayers. Any tale of woe pains her and she turns aside to hide the pain. This is interpreted by the faithful as denial by the devi. Though it is announced that the Mother has no interest in healing the flesh or the spirit, women keep seeking favours. Such encounters make Lekha painfully conscious of her position atop the tiger. She wonders where she is going (Tiger 209-10).

Kalo’s predicament is precarious, as Bhattacharya describes:

He had accepted the old social order by
investing himself with Brahminhood and rising to the top, he still seemed to believe. Instead of undermining society, he had become part of it, used its strength, for he had tacitly accepted its rules and served its purpose well. What real difference did it make either to the order to which he truly belonged or the one to which he had attached himself? No, Lekha could not understand her father, just as she could not see what had been going on in him the past months. Mangal Adhikari was uneasy on the tiger's back, frightened by his own mutinous thoughts... (Tiger 210-11)

At last the real battle for the temple is about to start through the fate of a houseless boy. Lekha is quite determined not to give up Obhijit. But her father, as master of the temple, is not an individual man, but the social code itself. He will have to break the code, cut off his own limb. Moreover, Motichand has set his heart on marrying Lekha and Kalo has snubbed him. Making an enemy of Motichand is to ask for disaster (Tiger 211).

One day, in a rare gesture, Lekha, as the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss, blesses a sick infant. The mother leaves in ecstasy. The next afternoon, with her child dead, the mother returns and curses Lekha. Bamni says
that the mother has no real faith, but Lekha is mortified all the same (Tiger 212-13).

The role of the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss is a torture to Lekha. It is a punishment, not a release. The temple now affects her exactly like the brothel-house did years ago. So she is determined to destroy the Mother. The cookwoman brings her a good deal of intelligence. Motichand threatens to get rid of Obhijit if he cannot marry Lekha. The installation of Lekha as the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss cannot be stopped because, the _Swadesh_, reportedly owned by Sir Abalabandhu, has announced the date, but Motichand knows that she is just an ordinary girl (Tiger 214-15).

Lekha thinks that, if she marries Motichand, both Obhijit and her father would be safe. After all, Biten has not returned because he has not forgiven her. Since she cannot find happiness with any man other than Biten, Motichand could be a good rope to hang herself with. She can expect Motichand to discard her soon as he had discarded his previous wives. Motichand could be her saviour. With a prayer for Biten's success in his work for the people, Lekha decides to settle the score with herself. She goes to the evening _arati_ and sees Motichand in his usual place. By giving herself to Motichand she will pay off her debt of love to her father
and then at last have the right to be free. That night she tells her father her decision. He is aghast. She explains that Motichand will have a casteless spouse in her and eat food served by her contaminating hand and then, a child to compound the disgrace. That way she will be with her father in his battle. Finally, when her father, the temple and Obhijit are safe, she will tell Motichand the truth with her own lips. He will burn but he will be helpless. She asks him to prepare for the marriage as well as the yagna to instal the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss in the temple (Tiger 216-21).

The yagna to instal Lekha as the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss is about to start. It is a day of days in the capital city's spiritual life. Motichand spends freely. He has decided that, before marrying him, Lekha will shed her spiritual role and become simply a woman. He recalls the expensive thug he sent to his fourth wife Radha disguised as a yogi to persuade her to agree to his fifth marriage (Tiger 221-23).

Lekha ascends the Pavilion and Motichand invites Kalo, as the maker of the temple, to speak (Tiger 224-25). Kalo says:

"The holy words have been taboo to folks of my caste for thousands and thousands of years, ever since they were invented, ever
since our way of life started. And I, who stand before you, I who made Shiva's abode. ... I who made this temple was not born a Brahmin." (Tiger 225)

The assemblage takes the statement as a joke. But Kalo's eyes are fixed and smouldering. When Lekha declared her will to marry a man she could never love or respect, Kalo decided to kill the tiger he was riding (Tiger 225-26).

Bhattacharya traces the evolution of Kalo's mind:

Everything that had happened to the simple kamar of Jarna town had slowly worked into the texture of his being. The jail-house, the harlot-house, the temple. Anguish and shame and exultation. Never again would the smith be despised, mocked, trampled upon. Never again. For the fetters of his mind had been cut. The look in his eyes was clear and undazzled.

The next phase came when Biten stirred him to the depths, not by words, simply by example. An example of smothering one's own heart in loyalty to an idea.

The crisis of mind Biten had predicted for him would perhaps have come upon Kalo anyhow, but Chandra Lekha, bent on destroying herself,
forced his decision. His hand had at last attained the power of his will. It would plunge a dagger into the tiger's heart.

(Tiger 226)

Kalo reveals the truth to the audience:

"I have installed a false god, for there was no dream at all. I have made you commit sacrilege and blacken your faces. There is no expiation for you—may be the writers of the holy books have not prescribed any, for they could not have dreamed that such a thing could happen! Some of you have been wild-eyed with wrath because I gave shelter to a homeless little boy of unknown caste. A down-trodden kamar has been incharge of your inmost souls, souls corrupt with caste and cash!" (Tiger 227)

Someone in the assemblage cries that this cannot be true. Kalo angrily bares his chest. He wears no sacred thread (Tiger 227). Kalo continues:

"So you know at last. I am a kamar from afar. Hunger drove me from my native earth. Hunger took me to jail. From there I walked into hell itself. I saw the face of Evil. I asked myself a question, I who had been content with my lot, my humble place in life. I puzzled
over all that had happened to me until the answer came: Nothing is as true as falseness! The more false you are, to yourself and to others, the more true you become! The rest of the answer is, evil is to be faced and fought with its own knives!" (Tiger 227)

Kalo goes on:

"So it was that, first of all, I made myself a Brahmin. The sacred thread lay across my chest. Do not dare judge me or call me a swindler. I have been as Brahminic as any of you! Then I performed a trick of magic. . . . I chiselled a piece of stone in Shiva's shape. I buried it at this spot where the temple now stands, and under the stone was gram, two seers of gram. As I watered the earth, the gram underneath swelled and pushed the stone up to the surface. People stood by, watching the miracle happen." (Tiger 228)

The pujari leads the reaction, calling for punishment for the rogue who has made them eat filth and doomed them to suffering for life after life (Tiger 228-29). A stone strikes Kalo's chest and draws blood. The dignitaries on the platform run for cover. Kalo pushes aside Lekha who tries to shield him with her body. Some
people abuse Lekha and Obhijit (Tiger 229).

As tension mounts, the common people on the fringe of the assemblage—street sweepers, rickshaw runners, coolies from a neighbouring factory—who had come to see the spectacle murmur excitedly, appreciating Kalo for making the mighty ones eat dirt. They identify themselves with Kalo. Just then Biten and Viswanath turn up as though standing guard. At this moment the back rows erupt with the shout 'Victory to our brother!' The cry is taken up by the others (Tiger 231).

The Brahmins rise in panic but face hooligans with daggers in their waistcloths. Kalo and Lekha walk out of the place. Biten tells Kalo:

"You have chosen, my friend. You have triumphed over those others—and over yourself. What you have done just now will steel the spirit of hundreds and thousands of us. Your story will be a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken." (Tiger 232)

Kalo's efforts to be a traditional 'good' convict in the jail require a good deal of patience and tolerance, but they don't bring any great reward. His efforts to find honest work lead him nowhere. The good earnings as a pimp come as a distasteful revelation to him. He is degraded. The ignominy of seeing his own beloved daughter being forced into prostitution is the
last straw that breaks Kalo's back. He changes irrevocably into an avenger of the sufferings of the destitute at the hands of the boss people.

Kalo vengefully exploits the traditions subscribed to by the affluent to dupe them and to dishonour them by their own standards. He plays one rich man against another. He violates their rituals at will. In the end he denounces them.

Lekha's life after the onset of the famine is one long tale of woe till Biten meets her. She undergoes change mechanically, for the sake of her father. But she has mounted the tiger with him and cannot dismount. Her proposed installation as the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss is the final insult dished out to the blind devotees. But Lekha suffers all through it because her heart is not in it.

It is only when the trustees threaten to denounce Obhijit and Motichand threatens to blackmail Lekha into marriage that Kalo decides to dismount from the back of the tiger. He is prepared for the consequences. Fortunately the rigid caste system that tradition has built up and sanctified comes to his rescue. The Brahmins are outnumbered and beat a hasty retreat.

Despite his successful masquerade, Kalo remains a kamar at heart. He is thrifty as ever, indulges his
blacksmith's urge secretly, though only once, gives refuge to a down-and-out kamar named Viswanath and gladly accepts Obhijit. He browbeats the trustees of the temple to support Viswanath's humanitarian wish to distribute the milk used in the rituals to starving children.

While the destitutes suffer passively in So Many Hungers!, those in He Who Rides a Tiger protest and rebel. They march, shout slogans, and, to the shock of the fat devotees and sanctimonious Brahmins, demand food. In the case of Kalo, their retaliation shakes the very foundation of the complacent society of the affluent and the religious. He destroys caste barriers, religious taboos, rituals, traditions and conventions, exploiting the baseness, insincerity and hypocrisy of the so-called leaders of society. Biten's life is a long protest, topped by his rejection of his Brahminhood. Viswanath will always protest, whatever may be his age and whoever his employer.

In "Bhabani Bhattacharya: Novelist of Social Ferment," Raizada says that He Who Rides a Tiger "satirises the blind religious faith of ignorant masses, who grudge to feed famished destitutes but fill wholeheartedly the alms-bowls of the sadhus dressed in saffron loin cloth" (162). Kalo the blacksmith going to Calcutta in search of livelihood depending upon his skill as a blacksmith undergoes a painful transition,
says T.N. Dhar, in "Bhabani Bhattacharya's He Who Rides a Tiger: The Role-Playing Matrix," and quotes from the text of the novel:

Months before, in the court house, something that had been a true part of him, had split off and fallen in the prisoner's dock; something more had been left behind the prison gates. Tonight, a bigger and most basic part of his being was on the flowered carpet of the harlot house. (Tiger 69; Dhar 97)

In Major Indian Novelists, A. Venkata Reddy comments on Kalo's reaction: "He declares war on society and resolves to be revenged on its pillars for the famine they have caused and the harlot-homes they have kept flourishing" (71). Kalo dons the sacred thread of a Brahmin, throwing off, with that gesture, "the heavy yoke of his past" and making himself rootless, points out Meenakshi Mukherjee in The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English, and asks the disturbing question: "But did Kalo have the intellectual strength to accept the rootlessness?" (119). Iyengar says that, after his fraudulent raising of Shiva, Kalo "builds up a structure of popular faith, and the collusion of half-lie and half-fraud pays rich dividends" (417).
In "He Who Rides a Tiger: A Study," A.V. Krishna Rao says, "Kalo's existential encounter with the conventional system of values—social as well as legal—makes him recoil from the reality of humanity" (144).

In "Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'He Who Rides a Tiger': A Socio-Economic Study," Bimalesh K. Tripathi says, "In the story of Kalo and his daughter Lekha, the novelist presents a cosmic view of human suffering caused by a system 'corrupt with caste and cash'" (13).
Note

1 All subsequent references to the text of Bhattacharya's novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* will be indicated by *Tiger*, followed by the number(s) of the relevant page(s) in parentheses, the text used being the Hind Pocket Books edition of 1955.