Chapter – V

MYSTIC VALUE OF AURUM
A GODDESS NAMED GOLD
A Goddess Named Gold is Bhabani Bhattacharya’s fourth novel and was published in 1960. Like Bhattacharya’s other novels that have freedom movement as their background, this novel also displays his humanistic attitude and social conscience. The novel narrates the incidents that happen in a village during the hundred days before Indian independence. In the first chapter of the novel, one of the women characters shouts. “Ho! A hundred days left until we are free-free!”(7).

The plot of the novel is based on contemporary social and political human problems. It has won the laurels of many critics. D.B. Shimer remarks that the main theme of A Goddess Named Gold is,

the people’s preparation for nationhood” and “The ultimate test of nationhood will be the moral fiber of villagers...impoverished, illiterate, superstitious perhaps, but hard-working, basically intelligent and wise in tradition1.

In this novel, the novelist presents a very interesting picture of the simple life of the people who live in villages and work hard on land. The village taken for background is Sonamitti and it can be any Indian village. The name of the village itself is symbolic:

Sona = gold

Mitti = soil
The peasants of the village, as peasants of any Indian village, live in mud houses:

Stretched on the dung-washed earth were mats of coloured reed and at the room’s corner stood two brass pictures of cool water to drink. The dark-brown walls of mud were decorated with shiny pictures pasted on them row on row; colourful prints of goddesses, heroes from history, landscape. The prints were trademarks of cloth mills and had been peeled off saris and dhotis in the Seth’s stock – the assistant at the store, Bulaki Rao, had given these to Lakshmi at her bidding. A faint aura of cow smell lingered in the shed, a minor inconvenience. 

Every page of the novel has an elaborate description of the life of people in Indian villages, the part of India that is not touched by scientific and industrial progress. When Sohan Lal goes to see the grand mother of Meera, the writer takes this opportunity to describe the landscape: “On one side of the road was a broad stretch of plow land where scores of peasants, men and women were picking maize.”

The novelist is pricked by this social conscience when he describes the poverty of the people of Sonamitti – both land-wise, cloth-wise and food-wise and almost in every walk of life. They are deprived of all the amenities that make life live-worthy. The cultivated and the cultivable land is not properly distributed among the people. Only the rich and
influential possess much of the land. The grand father of Meera says, "This fruit-giving earth. Enough earth for all if shared fairly. So much belongs to so few. The same tale every where. One man owns half a village: the tillers have the rest in five hundred morsels." (69)

The lines spoken by the grand father are absolutely thought provoking: it is the same tale everywhere, it is the same story wherever one goes. Had land in the world been fairly distributed, there would have been no Marxism – no Communism.

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s social consciousness doesn’t let him cease here. He is a very powerful writer who is devoted to the cause of the country–its poverty and the exploitation prevailing in the country. He places his characters in a position where they have to face such dilemmas which a country is made to face. This novel is truly a sensitive portrayal of social, political, and economic life of the people. The novel is concerned with the welfare of mankind. It exposes the people who exploit other human beings and tries to make all the people aware of their rights and needs. As M.K. Naik observes,

The highest reality in the world is man and his life. The fulfilment of the self, which depends upon man’s full freedom, is the noblest object of human life. The destruction of all sorts of barrier-social, political and religious-is necessary for self-realization. Liberal education, humanistic
art, and fair distribution of the benefits of progress are the means of achieving the ideal of a full and happy life.

In this novel Lakshmi, wife of Seth Samsunder, is torn between her own ideals and her husband’s materialism. Seth Samsunder is a cloth-merchant and a money-lender who wants to leave a high patrimony to his only Son Nago. Like other novels of Bhattacharya this novel also has the freedom movement as its background.

Meera :“The big struggle should have come a few-years later”,

Champa : “ Meera, to give you a chance to fight, the Angrez people should stay on for a while. They have ruled this country for two hundred years;”

Munni : “Think of it and the breath stops in each nostril, then blows fast-faster.”

_A Goddess Named Gold_ has as its theme, the economic freedom of hungry masses and tries to make the people aware of the evils of black marketing. Bhattacharya had written a short story “Desperate Women” with two themes. One is the theme of the rescue of the child and the other one is the sale of saris. The short story runs thus:

Nago, the only son by Lachmi fall into the well accidentally and the boy is saved by brave Meera Bai, an unmarried young lass of the village. And Meera Bai forces Lachmi’s husband, the owner of the sole cloth-shop in the village to release the
hoarded saris for sale. Meera supports her and the women of the locality are moved and praise the brave woman (Lachmi) and cry “Lachmi Bai Ki Jai.

Bhattacharya opens his novel giving this incident the first place. In the novel Lachmi appears as Lakshmi and Meera Bai is presented as Meera. Lachmi’s husband is Seth Samsunder, a rich cloth merchant and Indian Shylock.

The novel runs like a drama-a Shakespearean drama-the first chapter acts as the exposition of the plot. It introduces all characters in one go.

Bhattacharya in the first chapter of the novel itself gives a vivid picture of the clothes the women of Sonamitti wear:

Saris patched over and over, jackets cut from cast-off gunny sack-that was why the price of old bags going up. At night, to save their saris further wear, some of the women slept almost naked. This, is a village of rich black earth yielding a hundred bales of good fiber cotton every season, enough to clothe the whole district. (9)

This passage not only describes the poverty of the people but it also explains the selfish and exploiting nature of Seth Samsunder, the owner of the sole cloth shop in Sonamitti and the six villages around. He makes use of the countrywide sari shortage, he corners the supply and pushes up prices. He has a “Belly – that – ate – all”².
Lakshmi knows that the women’s predicament with regard to clothes is due to her husband. All the cowhouse five members want to make the Seth sell at a fair price. In order to make the Seth oblige their demand they hatch several plans. They ask Meera to take the guise of Devi and appear to Seth in the night and ask him to, “Sell cloth to the women at a fair price. Or else my fury will smite thee like a thunder bolt”. (12) This plan is not accepted by Lakshmi and so they give two more plans. Meera suggests that

A hundred women would line up on Main Road and march behind a banner of rags aloft between two tall bamboo poles, march west – east, south – north, finally sweeping into Jamarind Alley, which led to the raised stone portico of the Seth’s cloth shop. They would stamp their unison while crying in one big voice, “We demand cloth to wear, cloth”. (13)

When the Seth does not oblige, they have another plan:

A desperate remedy will then be called for. We shall make a threat to strip ourselves bare. ‘Take the rags off our bodies, add them all to your hoarded shame’. That will shake him to the roots of his hair and he will see sense. (13)

All the women approve of the plans. Lakshmi finds herself in a fix. She feels wretched: “Under her husband’s implacable will, she was a lump of clay. The habit of submission was her ages-old inheritance. A woman had
to obey her husband and household king” (14). They ask her to support their cause. She does not support her husband for his avariciousness and at the same time she cannot say “yes” to them.

At this juncture an alarmed shriek is heard from the yard. Sohagi comes across the yard panting and says, “Nago! Nago has fallen in the well” (15)

Munni plucks one twig from her coiled-up hair, mumbles mysterious words, and casts it into the air. It is a charm that countered the evil. Meera gets ready to save the child from the well. She recollects how she had saved one Ganeshi when he was bitten by a big black cobra and how her farther had died of a snake’s bite. She saves Nago from the well and as a token of gratitude Lakshmi offers her a lovely blue sari and a jacket which were subsequently rejected by Meera: “To wear new clothes and her friends in tatters?”(21)

All women of Sonamitti go to the Seth’s shop with a banner demanding saris. But Seth says “Business is business”. Even when Lakshmi goes and threatens that he would leave the room and walk naked on the Main Road, Seth does not yield, Lakshmi gets desperate. She represents the modern resurgent women who fight for their rights and against social justice. But later at last the Seth sells cloth at a fair price to win the love of his wife. She represents as a synthesizer of the old and the new values.
In the first chapter itself, the author talks to the reader about the imprisonment of the villagers including women for having taken part in Quit India Movement. Even to fight against the Seth’s monopoly of the cloth trade and his exploitation of the poor peasants, the women of Sonamitti adopt the Gandhian way. This protest-march is led by a girl of sixteen, Meera. Meera is the heroine of the novel.

Meera and Lakhsmi play a dominant role in the novel though the novel is woven around the characters of Meera, Lakshmi, Meera’s grandfather a minstrel who appears in the novel four or five times. He is a wondering minstrel who is recognized by all others as Atmaram. The other character who deserves a mention is the driver of the cycle-motor with a side-car, of the Seth, Sohan Lal who falls in love with Meera and ultimately marries her and settles in Sonamitti. Meera’s grandfather, the people of Sonamitti believe, has visited the Himalayas and has had given one taveez – an amulet-, to a three-month-old son of Sohagi; and another taveez to Meera saying that whatever metal is touching the body of Meera would turn into gold if she does any act of kindness inadvertently.

The Seth lacks his memory to know or to understand –

He had been straining to get to the root of the problem – what is real kindness? The idea came at last that kindness had to be a natural impulse. Contrived, deliberate, it lost all its value. Kindness could not be resolved into a deal. It was a matter of
the heart...The act had to be done, the selfless, spontaneous act of real kindness. (208)

Bhabani Bhattacharaya has made Meera, despite her poverty and down-troddenness, a character whose heart is filled with nothing but kindness – a kindness that doesn’t expect anything in return. Knowing this, the Sethji contrives plans to make Meera act, not knowing what she did for Meera had taken loans to help people in distress and those loans had pushed her into deep water.

Therefore the Seth wants Meera to wear more copper on her body. The Seth plans to get a new supply of ornaments from town and he himself wants to get them, selecting the heaviest pieces.

Bhattacharya, as a writer with a strong social consciousness created the character of the Seth who stands as a representative of the avariciousness and personification of greed and lust for gold. The characters of Shylock and Volpane fade into insignificance when compared them with the character of Seth. When the Old father was offered by Meera to stay in the village (that was given to her by Seth himself), the Old father refuses to take the money saying: “But not one pice of the Seth’s money, soaked in peasant’s blood” (214).

The Seth doesn’t love any one trait that can be called human. Everything he counts in terms of money. The society for him is not based on give and take. He always wants to be at the taking end.
When one goes through the novels of Bhattacharya, one can’t but see the influence of the western and Eastern writers. The writers whose influence can be seen are: Romain Rolland, Ibsen, Shaw Bernard, Walt Whitman, John Steinbeck and Sinelair Lewis. The words of D.B. Shimer in this regards are surely to be recollected.

...new horizons were opened by some of the greatest writers of the west. Romain Rolland’s Jean Christophe ‘overwhelmed’ him, and Bernard Shaw began to influence him. There was also the invigorating literature of Norway, the works of Ibsen, Knut Hamsun and Johan Bojer. A favourite American author at that time was Walt Whitman, who would be followed later by socially aware writers of the twentieth-century as John Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis, Johan Dos Possos, Upton Sinclair. And there would be Alan Paton, one of his favourites, whose books on Africa were, like his own, written ‘from a base of social concern’.

Though a novel, a drama or a poem is a work of imagination and a verbal representation of the writer’s point of view, it is the crystallized form of the writer’s lifelong mission, his sense of commitment, his cherished ideals and dreams and his inner compulsions and, many times, a verbal form of a reformer’s social amelioration.

In A Goddess Named Gold, Bhattacharya introduces the device of allegory which is tiring and burdensome. In an attempt to elucidate the
underlying truth of freedom, he brings in the 'taveez episode' which does not hit the desired mark of the novelist. This method of circumlocution fails to achieve the anticipated end. No doubt the subplot of the taveez takes us into the world of 'make-believe;' but finally it lands us in a confused state, till it is resolved by the veritable explanation of the minstrel. The amulet or the 'taveez' is only a symbol of release, understood in the right perspective. But it is invariably associated with having an external purpose. The poor brains of 'Sonmitti' fail to grasp and recognize the deep symbolism hidden behind the amulet. Thus freedom is the theme round which the whole plot revolves.

The kernel of the novel is ripened into its full effect towards the close of the novel (almost in the last pages) and the reader begins to appreciate the theme from a retrospective glance and a flash back tempo. The minstrel begins to emphasise the fact that freedom is the touch-stone and it is a touch-stone for everyone. It is not enough to possess the touch-stone. It can wake to life and work its miracle only when acts of faith are done. Without acts of faith freedom is a dead pebble tied to the arm, with a bit of string, fit only to be cast into the river. The minstrel makes it still more emphatic when he says: "The miracle will not drop upon us. It is we who have to create it with love and with sweat. Freedom is the means to that end."

There is a thorough overhauling in the attitudes and temperaments of the villagers in Sonamitti, especially in those of Sohan Lal, who is wholly
transmuted by the speech of Jawahar Lal Nehru who impressed upon the millions of Indians.

"Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny and now the time has come when we shall redeem our pledge. At the stroke of midnight hour, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance."^4

The villagers of Sonamitti are thrilled into joy and the words of Nehru were charged with a second meaning in the lives of all, who began to search their hearts. Seth Samsunder is the incarnation of the new political awakening. The awareness of the people is duly presented in their trying to exploit every source to their own profit and advantage. But freedom too, when it goes beyond bounds, has got to be checked.

Bhattacharya brings a new awareness to the arena of Indian life and literature through this novel, ‘A Goddess Named Gold.’ He imprints such a clear and inimitable impression upon his novels that the readers find originality and novelty. Each character is chiseled with his sharp but pointed pen. Although the theme of independence has been earlier dealt with by Venu Chitale in his novel ‘In Transit’ and by Abbas in his
'Inquilab,' Bhattacharya's uniqueness and originality are evident in his approach. Despite the hostile opinion of some critics that there should not be an admixture of truth and fiction, Bhattacharya has exploited the imaginative possibilities in this novel.

The theme and narrative technique adopted in this novel call for a high amount of skill and acuteness in depicting the characters and the episodes. The readers' attention is focused on the trinity – Seth Samsunder, his wife Lakshmi and Meera. In the sub-plot, Meera and Sohanlal have a pretty part to play. The minstrel, absent of present, has a pervasive influence on all the events of the novel. He does not fall into the whirlpool of the material and earthly values of freedom. To him, freedom means something having spiritual content. It is not an escape from responsibilities, but a direct plunge into the real daters and values of life. The villagers do not permit him to go back to his life of seclusion, but impress on him the need for participation in the activities of the village of Sonamitti that he should make them share his faith in the future and release them from a past that is dead and gone. The truth of life is not to run away from it, but get into it and set it right, thereby making it happier. True realization of freedom is more essential than spiritual excellence and envisioned bliss. Thought has to find its fulfillment in action. As Emerson puts it in *The American Scholar* “Thinking is a practical activity; action completes it".
Dialogue is amply and justifiably used in this novel, especially in the conversation of the villagers and the members of the Cow-house Five. It is through this vehicle of expression that the characters are realized.

The lure of gold that become hard food for Midas, is taken up as a suggestive title by Bhattacharya for this novel. The love and attraction for this precious metal has ensured the lives of not a few and led them into the mire of helplessness and utter confusion. The life and career of Seth Samsunderji presents a true picture of this irrevocable truth. But the irony of the situation is that he is ignominiously defeated in his designs by the women of Sonamitti under the leadership of Meera. The defeat of the Sethji is the punishment for vice and the success of the women is the reward for right and virtue.

Bhattacharya shows skill in drawing the portrait of Seth Samsunder, with reminds us of Shakespeare’s Shylook and Marlowe’s Barabas. At times even Shylock pales into insignificance before the Sethji. Neither pity, nor prayer nor threats, nor tears can draw him from his objective: “Words will melt a ripe coconut, but not the Seth’s heart in its cast-iron shell.”

He believes in the survival of the fittest theory. But he knows how to swim with the current. Making money is his duty, as it were. That alone gives his life its meaning and value. Like the spider, he thinks he should trap the fools and fatten on their meat. Although he has no sense of proportion, he is capable of understanding the spirit of the times. But
business is business with him and it has no place for soft sentiments. Still he cannot defy the combined ‘will, of women’ and will submit. He has his own moments of remorse and feels that everything depends on one’s fate and that nobody can save anybody’s life.

He knows that there will be no gain without risk. He firmly believes in the bad-rock principle of trade – “Give and take”. He does not miss any opportunity if only it is profitable and will fight with every means, fair or foul. All the villagers, including, Grand mother, so inflated with pride-are his customers. The life story of the ingratiate people is registered in the red-bound ledgers. No one can escape his enchantment. Grand mother pledges away her land for cash. But he is flabbergasted to learn that his own customer is a contestant in the election against him. But he resolves the problem through the good offices of Meera, by cancelling all Grand mother’s loans. The combined and consistent efforts of the women of the Cow-house Five of Sonamitti enable them to come out of the shackles of Samsunderji. The people and the country should be freed from such vultures and jackals, who are squeezing the blood of countless millions. Even a wicked demon like Ravana has inner goodness, but not these living monsters of money-lenders. They draw blood out of stone.

Ultimately it is the fight with the Seths that will save India, not a miracale, not armfuls of gold. Bhattacharya’s optimism is very clear when he remarks: “The days of the Seths were numbered. Soon would the people,
vested with their new power, fully waken and their thunderous wrath would make every tyrant whine for mercy”6.

There are thirty four chapters in the novel and each chapter is an entity in itself. Except for the continuity maintained from chapters 19 to 28 dealing with a series of incidents in finding the nature of real kindness, the remaining chapters are disjointed and they mar the effect of the story and the interest flags. The novel is steeped in realistic atmosphere and the characters are full-blooded and we come across most of them in our day-to-day lives. The Sethjis are not uncommon, although such Meeras are rare and such Lakshmis are rare still. But the atmosphere acts in unison with other narrative elements which help the author to present a personal vision of life. There are only a few descriptive passages which are hardly vivid and graphic. However, at times Bhattacharya pens a few images which are masterly. The spider-and ant imagery which the Sethji sees discloses the innate traits of the Seth in exploiting the down-trodden and helpless victims of the society. Again the symbol of a snake which has half devoured a frog is highly effective.

Bhattacharya shows special art in naming his novels. There is always deep significance besides its surface meaning. ‘Sonamitti’ means ‘golden soil’ or ‘the land of Gold’. He declares the underlying truth of the title through the mouth of Meera: “One day she would look searchingly for the gold in life, truer than mere metal.”7
Gold has material and spiritual implication. On the material plane it means both power and possessions. On the spiritual plane it stands for purity, integrity and dignity. It is in the latter plane that the inner significance of the title *A Goddess Named Gold* is to be carefully understood. K.R. Chandrasekharan aptly puts it:

"Gold in the popular connotation is material wealth, but gold may also symbolise richness of mind or spirit. The gift of freedom should not be looked upon as a means for the acquisition of prosperity alone; it is the golden key which can open magic doors and admit us into a realm in which men think noble thoughts and do kind deeds to that happiness may be the portion of all."\(^8\)

The novel, in a way, illustrates the remarks of Fuller that men test gold, gold tests man. Who is the Goddess named gold? Is Meera the Goddess? Is Freedom the Goddess? Are women goddesses? Is village Sonamitti the Goddess? Whether one is gold or not there is possibility of people being alchemised into gold. Alchemy is the art of converting baser metals into gold; it is also the art of converting baser mettle into higher mettle, men into supermen. Alchemy has a philosophy and history behind it. Gold may also mean the metal that corrupts. If gold rusts what can iron do? The Seth and men of his type are corrupted by gold lust which goads the whole world as a character says in *The Jew of Malta*, "The wind that bloweth all the world besides, Desire of Gold."\(^9\)
Bhattacharya throws his lance at the beliefs of Indians about miracles, magicians, alchemy, fairy tales and fake sanyasis. The miracle of the ‘Magic Chamundi earth’ and ‘the dropping of sweetmeats into the kanhan’ illustrate the same. Their interest in horoscopes and star-conjunctions leading to good and evil omens is also markedly presented in this novel. He makes the minstrel his mouthpiece in conveying his own message and ideas on freedom: “Freedom cannot be given. It is to be built by our own hands.”

The minstrel is again an indirect representation of the Father of the Nation, who like the minstrel wanders in different places, meets a large number of crowds and is admired and deified by them.

There are, no doubt, several improbabilities in the story. But the improbabilities themselves, like those in Shakespeare’s plays, highlight the impact of the story. In this novel, Bhattacharya, unlike in the earlier ones, has adopted a novel technique of symbols and allegory and in the light of this, Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar is justified when he remarks: “A Goddess named Gold” signifies an advance in his art as a novelist.

Bhattacharya disproves of the purposeless art and literature: Not ‘Art for Art’s Sake’ but ‘Art for Life’s Sake’ is his motto. His art has a strong purpose; a novel in his hands is an instrument to bring about an awareness of social reality. He believes that the values in art must follow the values in life, for the artist is a human being among human beings who is endowed
with special imaginary faculty to put together all his ideas in the form of
characters. A writer must deal with truth – the brutal truth – prevalent in
society even though this work of art is purely fiction. It is a mirror of
society where in one can see one’s own self and redeem himself if possible.

It is general opinion of common readers that characters should not
become the voices of their creator like the characters in the dramas of
George Bernard Shaw. The characters should be taken from real life and
must have a flesh – and blood existence. A writer’s skill lies in making the
characters human beings. By making them mere instruments of his
intentions, an artist could drain them of their vital sap. They must grow,
mature, change and behave exactly as human beings do. Bhattacharya also
felt the same with the common readers and hence the characters of his
novels are taken from real life and every character has a flesh – and – blood
existence.

If the novels of Bhattacharya are to be categorized whether they fall
under ‘Art for Art’s novels’ or ‘Art for Society’s Sake’, his novels fall
under the second category. This is so because Bhattacharya believes that “a
novel must have a social purpose and must place before the reader
something from society’s point of view” His main aim seems to have been
“to deal with the problem of social change”\textsuperscript{12} and his works are an
instrument to achieve this end. Mulk Raj Anand is a revolutionary social
realist with his novels –\textit{The Coolie} and \textit{The Untouchable}, Bhattacharya is a
reformist social realist.

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Bhattacharya is neither a propagandist nor a moralist. He does not tell his readers either directly through authorized commentary or indirectly by making his characters embodiment of certain principles or ideas at the cost of their flesh-and-blood existence.

Bhattacharya’s characters now and then show impassioned outbursts of anger or protest against social evils, such as, caste system hunger and exploitation. At such times his novels can be charged as novels of protest. The protest could be in the form of actions, and words by characters against individuals or institutions, against traditions and superstitions and they are invariably for the betterment of society.

The characters, especially all the women characters, that is, the Cowhouse-five, make the readers think about the social, and political awareness. The subtleties in the characters, the dilemma in which Lakshmi and Meera are placed are the clear revelations and they awaken the people from the slumber that something might happen that can bring a drastic change in their lives. They warn the people and ask them to guard themselves against profiteers and amulets. It is suffering and sacrifice on the part of the people that can bring good in their lives. Unless the people change the miseries of the society cannot end. If the character of the people doesn’t change the miseries in the world will continue.

The Seth, for instance, is mad after money and gold. Bhattacharya has used gold in this novel as a symbol of inner wealth – the character – the characters of Lakhsmi and Meera. The society is, unfortunately, filled with
people like Seth. In the novel ‘a spider ensnaring a red ant’ symbolizes a money-lender like Seth. The Seth identifies himself with the spider and believes that,

"- the slow-witted were meant to be the prey of their betters.

The fittest alone were fit to survive” (96)

People in the village knew, neither pity nor prayer nor threats nor tears could draw him from his objective” (129)

Thus the Seth stands as a symbol of economic, political and religious exploitation. Meera stands as a symbol of new India that can be readily and willingly exploited by the greedy Seth, Sonamitti refers to the rich potentiality of land in terms of human values.

Bhattacharya as a novelist of social conscience frequently affirms that social freedom is all important for the real progress of the people because without it even political freedom is ineffective and of little value. In this novel, the women of the village are the strongest motivating forces in all aspects of village life. The Seth, personification of selfish and greed is sublimated in the general life of Sonamiti until the minstrel performs an act that brings them to the surface where they can be exercised. The village after getting itself purged of all its evil will be prepared to meet the dawn of a new India.
The minstrel visits the village very rarely. Once leaving the village, after an evening singing some of the episodes of the great Ramayana, he ties to Meera’s arm a taveez, a magic amulet.

He tells her:

“This taveez holds a stone. The stone has a power. It is a touch stone….Wearing it on your person you will do an act of kindness. Real kindness. Then all copper on your body will turn to gold……Gold with which to do good…..An act of real kindness – that is the key, remember”.

Parted from your arm, the touchstone will be dead-a worthless pebble” (85)

The minstrel, the sole creation of Bhattacharya is a combination of spiritual faith and modern outlook on life. He owns nothing and so owes nothing to anyone.

“He had the dignity of a king. He had more power than a king, for he could take the hearts of people in his fist, he could make them laugh and cry at his will”.(61)

Bhattacharya seems to have taken elaborate pains and to have pondered much about the creation of this character. The Minstrel is a combination of the past and present. He sings folk songs keeping folklore alive to the people of Sonamitti. He is also aware of the existing social conditions and the malpractices of the rich who exploit the common masses
for their own vested interest. He also knows the importance of “vote” and “election”. Hence he warns Meera and feels afraid that the people of Sonamitti might elect the Seth as their representative to the District Board. He is “a homeless, ever-wondering minstrel”(115). He does not live for himself or for his kith and kin, but thinks about the welfare of the whole mankind. He is a Gandhian idealist who wants better life-conditions for the masses in the country. He has an ardent wish “to wipe every tear from every eye”(75). He is a practical – minded person, and is fully aware of the danger to his people from the Seth’s unscrupulous ways. The invention of the touch fable and the act of giving the amulet to Meera show the Minstrel’s practical wisdom. Through it, he is able to save not only his own family, but the entire village from the Seth’s deadly clutches. The minstrel goes on “following a middle course” (72) between two ways of life, and exemplifies a happy synthesis of the old and the new elements.

The minstrel ultimately serves Bhattacharya to vent his views on the use of freedom and the conditions in which freedom can be of value. The minstrel assures the people of Sonamitti that freedom is capable of bringing about miracles and at the same time warns them that no miracle can happen without effect. The taveez presented to Meera is only a symbol by freedom. It implies that freedom will enable us to make our lives golden provided we are capable of right feeling and right action.

Bhattacharya as a novelist of social conscience lays emphasis on the idea that freedom is not merely political freedom or economic freedom, but
freedom of the mind. The minstrel refers to Gandhiji’s definition of freedom as a ‘state of the mind’. Bhattacharya uses a phrase which he is very fond of and which he uses again and again in his works – ‘the freedom to be free’. Meera’s throwing away of the taveez into the river is interpreted by herself as a sign that ‘she had won the freedom to be free’.

Bhattacharya visualizes free India through the character of Meera. When the elections for the District Board were on the cards Meera sees a Board with its responsibilities.

“District Board? It was meant to provide the people with certain amenities. Better roads where the ox-cart wheels would not sink into dust of mud. Wells for public use. A free dispensary based at Sonamitti, serving the Seven Villages”.

(194)

“……this end was to be the point of a new beginning. She had to make Soamitti a bright jewel” (194)

As Stephen Ignatius Hemenway writes,

“Bhattacharya’s endings of the novels are contrived happy ends”.

A thorough reading of the novel A Goddess Named Gold reveals that the ending is very well contrived (to use the same phrase of Stephen), one thing naturally leading to another. Bhattacharya himself has stated that the truth of the matter is that his novels do not end according to his original plan but
get modified or changed to the demands of the characters. All the same, the fact remains that they end on a note of optimism or compromise, revealing Bhattacharya’s positive picture of life to inspire the coming generation for building a prosperous and a glorious nation. It is also true that he has raised certain social and economic issues together with the conflicts they involve.

Bhabani Bhattacharya speaks through his novel *A Goddess Named Gold* to people of many cultures and many levels of sophistication, for it has been widely translated into other languages, bringing the book to readers in such diverse lands as Russia, China, Israel, and France. The book has been a prescribed reading for Malaysian children in the schools of Kuala Lumpur.

Prema Nandakumar comments on the novel in Swarajya (July 28, 1962) *A Goddess Named Gold* stands out as a novel with a purpose, sustained by high seriousness. She then equates the message with India’s response to independence, achieved as the novel closes:

The “amulet” is the gift of freedom which Gandhiji and the band of brave warriors, who had stood with him in fair and foul weather alike, have made to us. But what are we making of this “freedom”? We have idealists like Meera among us, but there are the Seths, too, there are the ever-ready bureaucrats (the Bulaki Raos) who are willing to translate the whims of idealists and the schemes of the calculators into crude, ugly realities, be the cost to the mass of the people
what it may. The rich are getting richer, the tribe of the bureaucrat is on the increase.........Where are “acts of faith” in all embracing Statism? Where are “acts of kindness” in a permit-license-quota-ridden regime...We need faith in ourselves and in our fellow-men, we need the religion that we-the rich and the poor – are all members of one another, and we need the courage to rely on ourselves for our salvation......... We have, in short, to hear to the minstrel grand father’s words.......... “Remember, friends, all this cannot be cheaply won. The miracle will not drop upon us. It is we who have to create it with love and sweat. Freedom is the means to that end”.


“With a wagging finger, the author seems to argue that planned generosity – like planned parenthood – has its limitations, and he reminds us that the proposition was thrashed out and defined ages ago in the words of Bhagavad-Gita: “Thou must do good without the thought of self”. Organized kindness is tainted, and therefore no kindness. But since the author loves the people he scolds and his fun – poking is without brittle edges, his lesson is pleasant to take”.

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Thus the novel *A Goddess Named Gold* is a highly complicated composition whose central theme has several counterpoints. The central theme is the people’s preparation for nationhood. It is human character – essentially good, sound and compassionate. It is on this character that the new nation is being founded. The ultimate test of nationhood will be the moral fibre of villagers such as these – impoverished, illiterate, superstitious but hard-working, basically intelligent, and wise in tradition.

As Millen Brand (Bhattacharya’s editor at Crown Publishers) observes,

“Gold, *A Goddess Named Gold*. The lure of easy solutions, of chimeric torment, of age-old greed. The division of Sonamitti is universal in its meanings....”
References:

1. D.B. Shimer, Bhabani Bhattacharya (Bostan: Twayne publishers, 1975)


8. Dr. K.R. Chandrasekharan: Bhabani Bhattacharya (Delhi: Arnold – Heinemann, 1974) 86.


