Chapter – II

MAN’S INHUMANITY TO MAN

SO MANY HUNGERS!
So Many Hangers was published in October 1947, soon after India achieved independence. But, it covers the war years with their uncertainties, agonies, cruelties, and frustrations. The fusion of the traditional and modern values is the most conspicuous feature of Bhattacharya's writings. As K.R. Chandrasekharan observes, “With his progressive ideas and his vision of a glorious future, he has also great admiration for the spiritual and cultural heritage of the country. Like the great men whom he admired, particularly Tagore and Gandhi, he is also a builder of bridges between the present and past.”

The novel unfolds the story of hunger that killed two million men, women and children in Bengal. In fact, Bhattacharya succeeded in weaving "motifs of different types of hunger into a thematic fabric in order to reassert a positive faith in the basic human values. Hunger becomes a symbol depicting man in the midst of things, man set upon by things, man confused and facing that inner real self whose existence perhaps he never felt sure of. In this novel, the motif of hunger becomes the central metaphor.”

The Bengal Famine of 1943 was so horrible and harrowing that “Human endurance ebbed. Hungry children cried themselves to death. Streams of desperate men ventured out of their ancestral homes in search of food, hanging onto the foot boards of railway trains, riding on the jam packed roofs” (110-111).
As Srinivasa Iyengar points out, “While the hoarders, profiteers and blacketeers plied a thundering trade, authority was apathetic, the wells of human pity seemed to have almost dried up, and only the jackals and the vultures were in vigorous and jubilant action.” The novelist presents the tragic story of that largely man-made famine.

The central theme of *So Many Hungers!* is the twin hunger for food and for freedom. The plot of the novel consists of two strands. The story of the young scientist Rahoul and his family, and that of the peasant girl Kajoli and her family. The story of Rahoul exemplifies the theme of hunger for freedom and the story of Kajoli exemplifies the theme of hunger for food. The two families live far apart. Rahoul’s family in Calcutta and Kajoli’s in a small village called Baroni. Debesh Babu, reverentially called “Devata,” supplies the bridge between the two families. He is Rahoul’s grandfather and Kajoli’s godfather.

Rahoul and his younger brother, Kunal, are the sons of Samarendra Basu. The small family represents in a way a cross-section of India’s middle class society with its variety and contrasts. Rahoul holds a B.Sc. degree from Cambridge. Before going to Cambridge he had contemplated joining the independence movement, but his father had successfully managed to send him away to England. As the novel begins, we find Rahoul on the staff of a college in Calcutta continuing his research on cosmic rays. He is happily married and has a daughter. His strong desire now is to join the struggle for freedom and self-respect, but for the time
being he refrains from action. The British officers think that Rahoul is on
the verge of a great scientific discovery that will turn the tide of the war
against the Fascist Japan. However, a staunch nationalist, he can’t forget
the hypocrisy of the British rulers, who talk about the Four Freedoms
which, so far as Indians are concerned, do not include the freedom to be
free. Thus, Rahoul proves to be one who has a deep faith in the moral
values of human life. Unlike his father, who is a materialist and hardcore
realist and who has a greed for money and fame, Rahoul loves his fellow-
beings. He sympathises with the suffering masses. That the father and son
are poles apart is noticed when during the Bengal famine, Rahoul runs a
free kitchen for the destitutes and his father goes on hoarding rice in order
to sell it in the black market. He finally throws in his lot with the struggling
masses. His passionate speech to the students exemplifies his fiery spirit:

With bitter smouldering rage he had been speaking
to the students, a widening circle..... The anger was
warm in his voice, and he had paused till his speech
was cool again. “Quit” cried all India. “You have
done us some good along with much evil. For the
good you’ve done you have been paid in full. The
accounts have been settled. Now, for God’s sake,
Quit.” (202)

Rahoul’s younger brother, Kunal, is inspired by neither idealism nor
patriotism. He is an affectionate and cheerful character. He joins the army
not because he is a patriot but because he likes the adventure and thrill of a soldier’s life. In his view India will gain recognition of her rulers if Indians prove their courage by participating in the war. The character of Kunal doesn’t have an important role in the novel. Only towards the end of the novel we are told that Kunal has been reported missing.

Rahoul’s father, Samarendra Basu, is a lawyer. He is greedy and his main aim is to amass wealth for himself and his family. It can be said that Samarendra Basu is one extreme and his father, Devesh Basu, is another extreme. When the world war begins, Samarendra takes it as an opportunity to multiply his wealth. He is so clever that when a beggar casually tells him that a grain of rice is preferable to money, he realises that the best way to make money will be by hoarding rice and selling it at the most appropriate time. This view is in fact the reason for the famine that swept Bengal during that period. Samarendra, with the help of a few partners forms a trading company called “Cheap Rice Limited.” This company tempts small farmers to sell both their stock of rice and the unharvested crops, to store the rice safely in some places, so that the absence of rice in the market increases its price. Thus the famine is entirely man-made. In order to gain more recognition and popularity he goes to the extent of spreading a rumour that Rahoul is engaged in research to discover a Death Ray which the Allied Forces can use and win the war. Ironically, all the dreams of Samarendra are shattered when news reaches him that Kunal has been missing and Rahoul had been arrested. To make the
situation more pathetic, Samarendra receives the news that the British Government has honoured him by awarding the title C.I.E.

Devesh Basu is depicted as a local Gandhi inspiring others to join the freedom struggle. He goes to jail several times and guides the people by example and advice. Above 70 in age, he lives in a village where people are dear to him, and he considers them "the core of his being, his blood-and-bone" (64). The villagers respect him and call him "Devata" out of love and respect. But, in his own family none except Rahoul understands the veteran freedom fighter. Manju, Rahoul's wife, describes Devata as follows:

"Grandfather. An eccentric. He had odd ideas. Ever since he retired from his work as a teacher at a city school he had lived by himself in a village not far from the sea; he lived like one of the peasant folk."

Thus we notice that the four male characters are of different attitudes to life. The two characters who have slightly similar attitudes are Devata and Rahoul. In the same way the two female characters in the family, Rahoul's mother and his wife, have different temperaments and attitudes to life. Rahoul's mother is a middle-aged lady of worldly wisdom while Manju, who is in her mid-twenties, is no novice in domestic affairs. Rahoul's mother is a practical minded lady and when she comes to know of World War-II, she is worried:
Mother felt worry. “War? It has started then? Why?
We must buy rice and mustard oil, a half-year’s 
supply, before the grocer has an inkling. Prices will 
touch the sky... Sugar, too. Clothing. I must get 
white English drill for the father and you two boys. 
And tinned butter, tinned fish. Strange tongue you 
children have. The rivers of Bengal chocked with 
fish - every kind, large and small. Still you fancy 
the year. It shapes packed in tins, both you and 
Kunal. The strong smell!” (6)

As already mentioned, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are 
poles apart. Manju lacks practical wisdom. She is a lady of the modern 
times while her mother-in-law has an old world-view.

As mentioned earlier the novel is made up of two plots, one with 
Rahoul as the central character and the other with Kajoli as the central 
character. As K.K. Sharma observes,

The joining link between the two plots of the novel 
is Devesh Basu, who is the de jure head of the 
family of the first plot and the de facto head of the 
peasant family of the second. Far away from his 
son and grandsons who lead a luxurious life in the 
city, he lives a very simple life in the village with
the family of Kajoli. More than that, Devata is a the source of inspiration to Rahoul and Kajoli, the two principal characters of the novel.\footnote{4}

Kajoli’s family lives in Barouni. Just as Rahoul symbolises with the Indians working for the freedom of the country, Kajoli illustrates the cruel fate of the rural population of Bengal at the time when India faced the Japanese period in the east and an unprecedented rice famine was created by unscrupulous capitalists. Kajoli is a lively and innocent girl of fourteen when the story begins. She lives in her ancestral mud- and thatch house with her mother and her younger brother, Onu. Her mother remains unnamed throughout the novel. Her father, who also remains unnamed, and her elder brother, Kanu, are in prison for having participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement. The family owns some land where paddy is grown with the help of hired labourers. The household includes the cow Mangala. The family represents some of the finest qualities of rural India. Their life is simple but gracious and dignified.

Kajoli marries Kishore, a modern young man. He is educated and enlightened. He has progressive views. He had been a labour leader in a cotton mill in Calcutta, had taken part in a strike, and had been imprisoned in the same jail as Kajoli’s father. Kajoli’s father had taken a great liking to Kishore and when the young man was released from prison he sent him to Barouni with a letter to his wife expressing his wish that Kishore should marry Kajoli. Kajoli has a brief spell of happiness after the marriage. She
is a peasant girl who has never been to a school. She is a traditional Indian girl. On the other hand the peasant’s work of sowing, growing and reaping paddy is alien to Kishore.

When we look at the major characters in Kajoli’s family, we realise how Bhabani Bhattacharya has succeeded in blending the traditional and the modern values in life.

The novel opens with a short paragraph referring to World War-II. Then almost immediately we find Rahoul’s wife Monju’s labour pangs worrying every one in the family. The novelist seems to suggest that destruction and creation coexist in the world. Rahoul experiences a sense of fulfilment and he believes that the death of millions of young men will surely bring about a new world order. When he hears that his wife has delivered a baby girl,

Rahoul stood rooted. The elation that made his heart swell! Two exciting things had happened to him this autumn day. The Prime Minister of Britain had declared war on the Swastika. Manju had given birth to a baby girl. Either event was a profound experience that made his emotions vibrate, as though he had achieved some personal fulfilment.
In the blood-bath of war much else would be drowned besides the Swastika. A million youths would not die in vain. (10)

The next chapter, Chapter II, begins with a bright new day. Rahoul is now free from the tension of the previous night and is now filled with high hopes. The nightmare is over. His wife is now a mother for whom the baby is an image of joy and he is also happy that the Allied Powers have declared war against the Nazis. He is replenished with fullness of life:

Rahoul jumped out of bed. He could have shouted or sung for joy; but contented himself with whistling shrilly. World forces were dancing to his tune. Had he not often in his fancy mobilized and international army of freedom-seeker and declared war on fascists? Rahoul washed, shaved. In his blood he felt the voice of India throb. (11-12)

His view is that the voice of India has always been an affirmation of life, and not a negation. He feels “the voice of India” (12). He is in such a mood that he thinks many Hindu taboos, which are considered odd and which are slowly disappearing, reveals “an inner purpose if you looked beneath the surface” (12). Rahoul is convinced that suffering purifies human beings. He is confident that the world will be better after the global
war: “In the agonies of war the soul of human kind would be cleansed. Human kind after the war would not be the human kind of before” (12-13).

Rahoul represents the greatness and goodness of life and, as his wife remarks, he feels for all humanity (18). He is unhappy that the war activities of the Allies or not activated by high ideals. He begins to think that, as a result, the new world order with joy and happiness is an impossibility: “The allies fought for victory and nothing beyond? Only to hang their washing on the Siegfried Line? No higher ideals were visible in their proclaimed war aims--none.... the first flush of dream faded and misgivings grew” (21). Even before going to Cambridge, Rahoul was influenced by his grandfather’s idealism and joyful approach to life: “In his pre-Cambridge days Grandfather had cast a spell over him, moulding his ideas, stirring a fire in his heart” (21). When Rahoul’s father came to know that “Fresh from College, youthful and eager, Rahoul had stood at the edge of the national movement that had flared up then, ready to plunge in at his teacher’s [his grandfather’s] word” (21), he was alarmed and offered to send Rahoul to Cambridge. The choice was, according to Samarendra, between Cambridge and prison. But when he realised that “Prison had become a place of pilgrimage” (21), he started a new line of attack:

Should you not give your very best to your motherland? How better serve her interests than such as a great man of science honoured by the world? And you would serve all humanity that way,
what better training ground than Cambridge? To break the Salt Laws and be rushed into prison – anyone could do that tens of thousands had done that. Must you, with your great gifts (and who is more certain of them than Rahoul himself?), rot in wasteland? (21)

Rahoul’s grandfather did not want him to go to England. When Rahoul said that he wanted to know the people of England before he could start his fight with them, his grandfather said, “Why should you fight the people of England? They are good people. The people are good everywhere. Our fight is with the rulers of England, who hold us in subjection for their narrow interests” (21-22). Thus, Rahoul’s grandfather, affectionately called “Devata,” represents faith in the greatness of life. In spite of Devata’s advice against his (Rahoul’s) going to Cambridge, Rahoul decided to proceed to Cambridge.

It is some years since he came back from Cambridge. Rahoul thinks that “If he had lost the emotional stirrings he had known then, he was more honest with himself” (22). The character of Rahoul’s grandfather is one of the best characters in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s novels. This can be clearly seen in the conversation between Rahoul and two peasants. When the villagers tell him that they call Devesh “Devata,” Rahoul is surprised.
Devata? Wondered Rahoul as they walked on. Grandfather’s name was not quite that. Devesh. No one had ever been named Devata.

“Why call him Devata?” he said, “Only a god is so called”

“It is because of our love for him”, said one peasant.

“Love? Surely Devata is to be worshipped, not loved?”

The man nodded as though in agreement.

“We are common folk, Sir. We have no learning in our heads – our eyes cannot make out the shapes of letters. In worship we read love, in love worship”.

“The divine bliss fills his heart with riches,” the other man explained further, “When we call him Devata, our tongue and our soul earns merit. We are only peasant folk, sir.”

(22-23)

Rahoul’s wife remarks that Rahoul feels for all humanity. When the man made famine breaks out, he is one of those few people who offer free help to suffering humanity. While his father, Samarendra Basu, is a profiteer responsible for the starvation of hundreds of human beings, Rahoul brings helpless pregnant women to his house and serves them. He is an embodiment of the true life-spirit throbbing with happiness.
Rahoul, even after getting a degree in Science from Cambridge University, depends on Dadu - his grandfather - for infusing him with trust in existence: “Dadu would show him the way as of old.... with renewed faith” (24). Dadu has high opinion of the ordinary rustic people. He believes that they are basically good because “Centuries of hardship and strain have not destroyed their faith in human values” (24). Sacrificing all comforts of life, Devata has become one with the rural people and their welfare is the aim of his life.

Kajoli is an embodiment of faith in the nobleness and fulness of life. She has unswerving trust in the worthiness and greatness of life. But, as for other starving people, for Kajoli also life has shed its young dreams. The novel presents a detailed and graphic picture of the Bengal famine of 1943. People have nothing to eat. Innumerable men and animals die of starvation: Hunger actually eats them up. They abandon their homes and relations and go to Calcutta only to see their hopes of a better life shattered: “Streams of desperate men ventured out of their ancestral homes in search of food, hanging onto the foot boards of railway trains, riding on the sun-baked roots. But the police threw up barriers. Then the men trekked the meadows and roads, then thousand village streams blowing city wards” (111). The irony is that the city where these poor people go has never grown any corn; it has only consumed the corn produced by the villages. Horrible scenes become a common sight. Kajoli, in a state of extreme hunger, eats the whole bread which she gets from a soldier, without thinking for a minute
about her mother and brother. When the soldier’s hand creeps down to her breast, she is “still drugged with eating” and does not know what is going to happen to her—a sexual act resulting in acutely painful abortion. However, the two satisfy the hungers of each other for the time being—the soldier pacifies Kajoli’s fearful hunger for food, while she satiates his long-standing hunger for a sexual intercourse with a woman. The most tragic irony is that many die when they take ordinary food because they are not fit to take solid food. Many die of the excitement at the sight of food at the free kitchens in Calcutta.

Hunger makes human beings inhuman. People hurt by bombs are taken to hospitals but nobody bothers about those who are hurt by hunger. Another aspect of hunger is that it debases even the good people. Onu, who has grown under the idealism of Devata, becomes a hoarder. He hoards for himself and his sister and mother wild green figs.

Bhattacharya also presents the essential goodness and nobility of the people. He presents a picture of their moral uprightness and courage. The young boy Onu faces the famine heroically, and also inspires others to do so. The last chapter of the novel illustrates the essential goodness and the moral courage of the people. At the very beginning Kajoli makes a grim decision of selling her body for money in order to keep her mother and younger brother alive, thus upholding the high ideal of self sacrifice. Kajoli’s mother is influenced by an old man who commits suicide so as to
prove that he is “a man still, undefeated” (192). She sees in him true manliness, and is so much impressed by him that she does the same.

The last three paragraphs of the novel present the greatness and richness of life. Rahoul, who has witnessed the endless miseries of the famished people, reaches prison thronged with people beaming with exultation:

There was no defeat in the voices, but a secret, excited triumph.... Listening, Rahoul began to lose his sadness, for in that instant he saw past the clouds of pain—he saw the horizon of the east illuminated by a new dawn. Freedom could not drop from the skies, nor be asked from lands beyond the seas; but there, in the vast swamp of suffering and struggle, would it break into blown, growing out of the seeds of the spirit...
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:

The more they tighten the chains, the more the chains loosen! (204-205)

In So Many Hungers! we have the literal story connected with a peasant family and a family from town, but deep beneath we see that
Calcutta, the town, symbolizes materialistic values of life while Baruni, the village, represents the spiritual and moral life of rural people.

In *So Many Hungers!* the novelist represents the clash between the sordidness and meanness of town life and the nobility of village folk by the symbols of Calcutta and Baruni, respectively. It is demonstrated that the former is not able to subdue the latter. The richness of the human spirit checks the helpless and starving Kajoli, the village girl, from debasing her body and leading an ignoble life. Kajoli is the symbol of India, which though humiliated and exploited by the alien imperialists, preserves it unconquerable spirit to face the mighty power. *So Many Hungers!* is thus an allegory of the victory of human values over the sordid and vicious ways of life. It is an allegory of the assertion of invincible spirit of India over the sinister power of the alien imperialists.

The texture of the plot is loose and the author’s attention is focussed more on the depiction of the aftermath of war and famine. However Bhattacharya shows consummate skill in providing a deep insight into the realism of the disastrous famine. Here are a number of detached incidents, more or less, with no harmonious blending. The situation predominates in the novel and it dwarfs all the characters. There does not seem to be a comprehensive general design. It is a composite plot in the sense that it centres on two families—those of Samarendra Basu, consisting of his wife, two sons Rahoul and Kunal, his father Devesh (Devta) and his daughter-in-law Monju; and the
peasant family consisting of two brothers Onu and Konu and their sister Kajoli and her husband Kishore. Dr. Chandrasekharan aptly states,

Rahoul's story is a representation in miniature of the struggle for Freedom. The sad tale of Kajoli is likewise a pathetic record of what had happened to more than two million men and women who became victims of a famine which was not an act of God, but which was brought about by the rapacity and selfishness of profiteers and the indifference of an alien Government.\(^5\)

The descriptions are surcharged with emotional atmosphere and the underlying sympathy of the author for the situations and the characters make the novel a memorable account of the war years more than any other historical details. Virginia Woolf said "The proper stuff of fiction does not exist, every thing is the proper stuff of fiction".\(^6\)

Bhattacharya presents his material by a cohesion of the possibilities of perception, memory and speculation. A knowledge of the past history, with an awareness of the present and a visualisation of the future, seem to be at the core of the novel. It is all done through the medium of characters, who act as the mouth-pieces of the novelist's sensibilities and reactions. This is in tune with Arnold Bennett's view that "The novelist is he who, having

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seen life, and being so excited by it that he absolutely must transmit his vision to others, chooses narrative fiction as the liveliest vehicle for the relief of his feelings.”

Bhattacharya makes a penetrating analysis of humanity at large and says that rich folk have poor memories. But the poor people, amidst all troubles and turmoils and frustrations and travails, never desist from the path of the right. Even in their miserable plight, they launch upon the methods of Gandhian idealism. That shows the height of human dignity. He also depicts the bottomless depths to which human nature gets degraded during times of war. It is precisely on this ground that Burke objects to civil war as it makes men less human. The ordinary bonds of humanity are relaxed and snapped.

The news of the declaration of war by Great Britain on Germany, broadcast on the radio, creates different reactions on different persons in diverse ways. Caught up in domestic responsibilities, the mother feels it highly necessary to store the daily needs, for it is a well-known fact that prices touch the skies during the war. Rahoul is sandwiched between the two incidents the drastic consequences of the war with the Nazi Germany and his mental tension over the birth of his firstborn. His father Samarendra Basu wishes to seize the opportunity by the forelock to make a fortune out of the war.
The total effect of the novel is one of wholesomeness. Though the story loses its grip from the ninth chapter, it gains momentum after the introduction of the family of peasants of the Baruni Village. To compensate for the otherwise flimsy nature of the plot, Battacharya fills the pages with very effective and realistic account of man-made famine and its effects on the unfortunate victims. It is thus a novel of impression, and not of argument. All the characters, though individualized, represent the general state and tragic situation of the people of Bengal caught in the excruciating misery of the famine. The novel is, in short, a pathetic study of man's inhumanity to man. Facts never tell much unless they are seen in terms of human experiences. The experiences of the villagers of Baruni during the devastating famine are drawn in harrowing detail. The village consists of hardly a hundred households. A quarter of them hold land on lease. Another quarter are landless kisans, peasant labourers, and are only wage-earners. A good many of them are fishermen. Thus life centres on rice-land and river. These peasants who raise the golden grain with the sweat of their brow and the blessings of mother Earth for their more fortunate brethren remain always hungry. It is a rare gracious day to have their stomachs full. Moreover they are prevented from having mass literacy, since it is a danger for the rulers when the masses become conscious of their birth right the right to live as human beings. The life of the fishermen becomes a tale of woe and the end of one tale is the beginning of another.
In *So Many Hungers!* Bhattacharya suggestively probes into the problems of existence, suffering, evil, love, passion and greed. The apparently simple story of the novel evokes a sense of shame in us and arouses our conscience. It also exorcises all our attempts at evasion, or justification of the immoral, the unscrupulous and the evil even today when every individual is protected by a carapace of an inherent duality of conscience. Bhattacharya stimulates thought, and enables us to see ourselves as we are in vices, virtues, values and transience. He also encourages, through this novel, an inclination for restructuring human personality within the context of a cosmopolitan value-system; and herein lays the universal appeal of *So Many Hungers!*
References:


5. Dr. Chandrasekharan: Bhabani Bhattacharya, 11
