CHAPTER V

BHABANI BHATTACHARYA - THE IDEAL IMAGE
**Bhabani Bhattacharya and the Ideal Image**

*So Many Hungers* deals with the travails of a peasant family during the Bengal famine against the backdrop of the turbulence of Gandhian Satyagraha struggle which finally culminated in the 'Quit India Movement.' Bhattacharya himself explains that the story of his novel is concerned with, "all intensified hungers of the historic years 1942-43, not food alone, the money hunger, the sex hunger, the hunger to achieve India's political freedom."

Bhabani Bhattacharya, being an ardent admirer of Gandhi, brings out a vivid image of Gandhi, whose influence made the innocent village peasants withstand to any amount of misery and suffering. Bhattacharya is much impressed by Gandhi's influence on the contemporary India that he declares that Gandhi "inspired creativity on a scale surpassed by none. He stood for the common man, for the humblest, the loveliest and the lost." Obviously, for Bhattacharya, as for other Indo-Anglian novelists, Gandhian struggles gave vast scope to deal with for his themes. Bhattacharya is a novelist with social commitment. So he juxtaposed the misery of ordinary Indians during the Bengal famine with that of

1 Bhabani Bhattacharya, "Contemporary Novelists," p. 136

Gandhian struggles.

Bahoul, an astro-physicist, is an example how a young man who was indifferent to the freedom struggle in the beginning, was gradually drawn into the vortex of the freedom movement under the influence of his grand father, Devesh Babu, a true Gandhian follower. Devesh Babu lived apart from his son Samarendra Babu who was a greedy lawyer turned business man. He lived in a small village Baruni doing the village construction work. As we all know national movement especially Gandhi gave top priority to the village construction work. The government did not like it, of course. They and the land lords have had grown to fear the peasant masses. As Devata explains, "I run school for the village, an evening school, Mass literacy is danger for the rulers." This is the Gandhian conception that Devesh Babu puts into practice. Devata, as Devesh Babu is called by the villagers of Baruni, is modelled after Gandhian image by the novelist. He is "so loving, so gentle! And yet firm and majestic. A true veteran of the national move­ment. Three times he had gone to prison, seven years in prison, Devata, the village call him no wonder."  

The character of Devata resembles Moorthy of Raja Rao's *KANTAPURA* in his Gandhian traits, but he is a more matured one than the young Moorthy. Unlike Sriram of R.K.Marayan's "WAITING FOR THE MAHATA", Devata is a person who has understood thoroughly the concepts of Gandhian ideology. But he is not like Jagan of *THE VENDOR OF SWEETS* who can manipulate Gandhian ideology to suit his personal interests. Gandhian image that is brought out through Devata is warmly human. That is why Rahoul, never a hero-worshipper comes under his influence gradually despite of his interest in academic work. It is Devata, who is moulded in the model of Gandhi and even his utterances are similar to those of Gandhi. As Devata says, "Its (the national movements) fight was with England's die hard rulers, not with her people who, defeated, would face enslavement, adding to the miseries of human kind. The national movement offered cooperation pledging its full strength to the war effort, in return for recognition of Indian peoples' right to freedom." This was what Gandhi explained as the reason behind his call for cooperation to the British war efforts during the II World war. Of course now many doubts have been raised regarding the real motive of Gandhi, behind

this call. Gandhi offered unconditional cooperation to Britain on the outbreak of war. But in July 1940, when his faith in Britain's victory was thoroughly shaken, Gandhi made a strange appeal "To Every Briton". Suniti Kumar Ghosh points out that Gandhi "urged them (the British) to lay down their arms, surrender to Hitler and Mussolini and to uphold the ideal of non-violence." But Devata perhaps did not understand the political manoeuvrings of Gandhi. He feels that fascism is more dangerous than the British imperialism. Here Bhattacharya echoes Gandhian preachings. To a question, asked by Rahoul Devata's reply is typically Gandhian, "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."7

Devata knows the needs and necessities of the villagers. He wears their dress and speaks their language and idiom. During the World War II the British government confiscated all the boats of the fishermen living on the banks of the Ganges. The Britishers did not want the boats to fall into the hands of the Japanese who were knocking


Bengal when the Japanese fleet ruled roost over the Waters of the Bay. Thus the fishermen lost their profession and were deprived of their livelihood. The British government then decided to burn even the rice fields, so that they did not fall into the hands of the Japanese. At the same time the company agents entered the villages, exploited the poverty of the people and purchased rice at higher price. Devata being a shrewd man, knows that this would lead to famine and hunger in the village. He asks the villagers not to sell rice but preserve it for their future needs. But economic compulsions force them to sell rice to the company agents.

In Rahoul Bhattacharya presents a western educated Indian intellectual who gradually turns to a Gandhian volunteer. But it is Kajoli, who embodies Gandhian ideals, even if we can not compare her with Bharathi, the sophisticated adopted daughter of Gandhi in R.K.Narayana's "Waiting for the Mahatma". Kajoli is a simple peasant girl of Baruni, who does not understand the intricacies of Gandhian ideology. She simply admires the goodness of Devata and treats him as her father. It is Devata who asks the villagers of Baruni not to betray themselves but to be patient. When the 'Quit India' call is given, all the congress leaders are arrested. The police come
to arrest Devata and the Villagers try to prevent the arrest. Then Devata asks them to be peaceful saying "Ours is the harder task. If we use the weapon of our enemy we play into their hands. The supreme test has come - Be strong; Be true; Be death less." These words impresses Kajoli "who is a well bread peasant girl" and who, according to Devata "has a legacy of manners as old as India." But the others cannot control their anger at Devata’s arrest. They burn government property and avenged themselves for the attack on their flags. This has a cumulative effect. The government levies punitive fine on the villagers. They have to sell their belongings, even the meagre rice stocks to pay the fine and it leads to food shortage. The villagers bear it with stoic resignation without even a murmur of protest. Now they are without a leader to guide them except their absolute faith in the advice of Devash Babu. They become passive and meek that they would not raise in revolt even when they are starved to death by the British policy. For them hunger and physical needs are not important.

8 Ibid., p. 72.
9 Ibid., p. 20
10 Ibid., p. 20.
issues to fight for. They are so imbued with the 'Karma' theory, which has been revived by Gandhian ideology of passive resistance, that they take their sufferings without a murmur of protest. It is not the physical needs that are to be satisfied but the spiritual needs, the age old Hindu tradition says. They feel that hunger is their fate and it is the consequence of their past sins as retributive justice. Thus their hands are manacled with their antique religious tradition and Gandhian ideology.

The novelist well portrays the influence of Gandhian religious concept which is a revival of age old Hindu religious concept of Karma theory. It does not mean that people did not fight against various local and foreign suppressors. In Bengal, Punjab, Kerala and various parts of country people especially peasants fought against the brutal revenue collections by the British and their stooges, local feudal lords. But Bhabani Bhattadharya here depicts only, one angle, the people's passivity inspite of many hardships they are subjected to. The dichotomy of Gandhian call for resistance is that they do not even try to prevent the native exploiters even from squeezing the last drop of their blood but they jumped in large numbers to protest
against the foreign exploitation, British imperialism. It is a fight with the shadow, the British government, leaving the local feudal lords who were the pillars of the British. If they had fought against black marketers like Samarendra Babu who exploited the war situation, they could have easily weakened their masters, the British. But instead of rebelling against the suppression and exploitation, they leave their houses and hearts hunting after the mirages like Calcutta where they expect to find food and shelter. This situation reminds the readers of the similar situation in Kanthapura where the entire village is deserted after the brutal police suppression. Their leader Moorthy leaves them rudderless there. Similarly in Baruni also the villagers are leaderless to guide them. But even if Devata were there, we cannot expect him to lead them fight against the local money lenders and black marketers as it is against Gandhian concept.

Calcutta proves to be a mirage to them. Thousands of destitutes and hungry millions throng the city in search of food and shelter. The Calcutta of Bengal famine presents both repulsive and disheartening picture when it exposes peoples apathy and helplessness. Bhabani Bhattacharya does not give us an account of second grade congress leaders
and what they did in the days of distress and calamity. But at the same time, we are shown the exemplary sacrifice of the people, being themselves in utter rags, for others. A young lady bares her body before the sex hungry soldiers for a few silvers to feed the hungry. It may look repulsive to the middle class mind and sinful to the moralist. But it is her supreme sacrifice in renouncing the sham shame for feeding the hungry and the disabled that demands our admiration. Bhattacharya's description of the filth and squalor, the hunger and misery of people really diverts all our attention from the 'Quit India' movement and Gandhi. One wonders what Gandhi would have done if he were outside the prison: whether he would have taught still passive resistance or asked people to revolt as his chela, Nehru wished them do.

But Bhattacharya, the Gandhian he is, tries to find a solution to the misery and hunger of Kajoli and her family members in Gandhian methods only. As Rama Jha points out, "The choice of theme and the area of human experience focussed on in this novel through the life of the common man, in a Bengal village, indicate Bhattacharya's Gandhian bias. The very conception of plot, the complication of events and the solution the novelist offers at the
end of the novel suggest the vindication of Gandhian ideas in the novel. Characterisation too in Bhattacharya is coloured by his Gandhian idea of what is good and evil. It is through Kajoli, Bhattacharya brings out Gandhian resistance to evil. Despite of hunger and misery Kajoli and her mother refused to fall prey to monetary temptations offered by a brother of woman. The mother commits suicide instead of seeking illicit ways to satisfy their hunger. The novelist in Bhattacharya drifts from reality here. Kajoli, in a moment of weakness, forced by hunger decides to sell her body to feed her brother and mother. She finds no other means to save them from starvation. To save her character from fall, Bhattacharya again goes to Gandhi for help. Kajoli suddenly hears the news that Devesh Babu is on hunger strike in jail and his photo is published in the newspapers. She is reminded of the parting words of Devesh to resist all evil temptations. "He started there, the tall, white clad figure with uplifted hand cuffed arms, and the pale silver of his hair and the pale silver of his flowing beard are torched with a light that

is not the sum alone. Devesh Babu's figure appears before her as if he is warning her and his words ring in her ears. "The supreme test has come. Be strong. Be true. Be deathless." This, according to the narrator, prevented Kajoli from falling a victim to brothels. But one cannot forget the gnawing hunger. As an alternative earning paper selling profession is shown. Whether it is practicable, for a young uneducated peasant girl, in a city like Calcutta, is question, a pertinent one which begs an answer. Whether, Bhattacharya's Gandhian solution, one wonders, satisfy even the meagre needs of thousands of Kajolies who have become victims to hunger in the days of Bengal famine? Gandhian, idealised solution, is removed far from the real needs of the people. Even a sympathetic critic like K.R. Chandrasekharan feels that, "there is something providential in Kajoli's choice of the correct path because she might have been irretrievably lost if she had not seen the newspaper boy and heard their shouting voices precisely at the moment. The story of Kajoli is thus not a story of redemption from sin but of providential escape from moral fall." Thus the Gandhian


13 Ibid., p. 72.
solution shown by the novelist does not look convincing.

Bhattacharya's depiction of Gandhian image in the novel can be seen in the portrayal of the character Devesh Babu. He is an epitome of all that is good and Gandhian. Bhattacharya's regard for Gandhi is revealed some times through the narrator's comment and other times through Devesh Babu's character. Referring to Gandhi's arrest, he makes a bitterly ironic comment, "A noble hearted person must share the lot of the gangster for speaking out his true faith in democracy. And the prison Warden was one who was pouring out his peoples life blood to rescue democracy from its chains."14 Here, for Bhattacharya, Gandhi is a true democrat. Apart from this, Devesh Babu, "has not only the hunger for ideal life, but all represents it with all its dignity, courage and grandeur. That is why he imparts strength and hope to every one who happens to come in contact with him."15 This is the image of Gandhi, that the majority of Indians have. Bhattacharya himself confessed that, "The story was concerned with the intensified hungers of historic years 1942-43, not food alone; the money hunger, the sex-hunger, the hunger to


achieve India's political freedom.¹⁶ Naturally, Devata or Devesh Babu is the one like Gandhi who instils confidence in an otherwise disheartened people and courage to fight against the British. He is an incarnation of trust and strength, radiating the otherwise gloomy lives of Baruni. Apart from the direct reference to Gandhi and Gandhi's image through Devesh Babu, there is an underlying theme of Gandhian ideology that spreads through out the novel. It is through the village construction work and spinning that Gandhi is said to have reached the villagers and mobilised them against the British. He also emphasises the importance of mass literacy programme which the British consider dangerous. Moreover "through Rahoul, Bhattacharya expresses his firm faith in freedom from want and freedom to be free. He realises that "freedom is not a manna dew dropping from heaven all itself, nor is it something to be obtained from far off lands. It is to be achieved by persistent struggle and is to grow out of man's spirit."¹⁷

Even Bhattacharya's evil characters are not born evil. They are made so by circumstances. It is the colonial and exploitative system that create many Samarendra

¹⁶Bhabani Bhattacharya, "Contemporary Novelists in the English Language (New York: St. Maruthi Press, 1972)

babus. Samarandha suffered poverty in his school days. Then he decided that his children should not suffer like him. To protect his children from deprivation to which he was subjected, Samarandha took to black marketing and speculation. Bhattacharya attacks the sin but not the sinner, thus reveals his aptitude for Gandhian ideals. As K.R. Chandra Sekharan rightly points out, "Bhattacharya reveals his admiration for Gandhi and Nehru and approve of some of the values for which the Indian National Congress stood, but he is no party man and does not accept in toto the manifesto of any single party." Bhattacharya's Gandhian image is nothing but of the image that is stamped in the hearts of an average Indian, which evokes admiration and respect for a father figure. Bhattacharya in delineating the Gandhian image is nearer to Raja Rao of Kanthapura.