CHAPTER III

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Chapter III

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s (1906-1988)

So Many Hungers (1947) and He Who Rides a Tiger (1954)

III.I Introduction

Bhabani Bhattacharya, like Mulk Raj Anand, is a socially committed writer. Born in West Bengal, he had seen the misery and sufferings of people during the Bengal famine. He has described the heart-rending incidents in an authentic way yet, the novel is not like a diary or a historical record. Bhabani Bhattacharya has woven the truth into an artistic fabric presenting bitter reality through the lives of characters in the novel. All his novels present a true picture of India and its teeming millions surging with life and substance. He does not believe in the dictum of art for art’s sake. His outlook is highly constructive and purposeful.

His wide range of experience in and around the world and his close association with men, manners and their personalities have enabled him to grasp the innate significance of humanity and all this finds experiences in his characters. He holds the view that- “Indian writing in English has been a decisive factor in redressing the balance of false presentations by foreign story-tellers who with their limited possibilities of true experience have seen only the surface of our way of life, failing to reach deeper into our spirit.”1 (Chandrasekharan: 1974, 32)
It appears that Bhabani Bhattacharya had a clear intention of portraying certain issues through the novel. Accordingly, he has created the characters especially for the purpose. The number of significant characters is limited but representative of masses. Hence, each character in the novel is important and carries a message for humanity. Social realism, with a social purpose, marks the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya’s works showing his affinity with the works of Anand.

The same purpose led Bhabani Bhattacharya to select an appropriate background for the novel. Bengal was struck with a famine and was struggling simultaneously with all kinds of human hungers, in addition to the exploitation by the British government and the materialistic elements of society. The novel deals with the themes of exploitation and greed against the background of the Independence movement and the Bengal famine in the 1940s.

III.I. So Many Hungers

III. I. 1The Story in Brief:

There is no story in the real sense. The novel traces the development of events as they occur in Bengal, during the Quit India Movement. It is focused on two families. One is the family of Samarendra Basu, a rich and affluent man living in Calcutta, with his wife, two sons, and a daughter-in-law. The novel begins on a happy note with the birth of his grand-daughter Khuku. The other family is located in the village of Baruni, also the village in which resides Devata, Samarendra’s father. His real children are the villagers who toil on the land and produce food for all. One of the
families is that of Kajoli, who lives with her parents and two brothers, Kanu and Onu.

Both families are happy and well-settled in the beginning. But with the raging World War II and the advent of Japanese threat from the Bay, things begin to change. The novel proceeds to show how events take a turn in the face of war. Attitudes change, social strata are created, food crisis results and leads to inflation. The villages are forced to sell land and cattle and migrate in thousands to the city of Calcutta in search of food. Bhabani Bhattacharya deals with each character and situation as he goes on to point out how characters are affected, what they do and how circumstances change. He puts across his message for human beings. He has wonderfully tied down all strands to the basic want – Hunger. He has shown that almost every human act is directed towards the fulfillment of some kind of hunger. This artistic feature prevents the novel from becoming a drab and lifeless historical chronicle. The novel throbs with the throbbing hungers on every palette and beats with the week feeble beats of the dying, overpowered by their undying spirits. Dr. S. P. Swain says, “Throughout the novel we come across instances of misery, poverty, starvation, deaths but these negative elements are subdued into the background when we consider the flickering of hope and assertion of the self.” (Bhatnagar: 1999, 137)

III. I. 2 Caste Factor:

Unlike Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable and ‘Coolie in which caste was responsible for class, So Many Hungers makes no mention of caste. In the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, it is observed that caste system is so rigid that it does not permit individuals
either to rise above or even to go below one’s own caste, which also decides the profession, and consequently the economic class. Thus, while the highest class of Brahmins is learned, they earn more than those below who are traders or menial labourers and who are denied the knowledge of Scriptures. While portraying the families of Kajoli and Samarendra Basu, Bhabani Bhattacharya has not made any mention of caste. There is no relation between caste and survival.

So Many Hungers is set on the background of the crises, the National Movement and the World War. Bhabani Bhattacharya’s intention is to show how society gets further stratified socio-economically as selfish and materialistic people take advantage of crises in order to become richer. Smt. Lila Ray writes, “As we read his writing, we hear his dialogue between man and his situations, between man and man and between man and the ideas he lives by.”3 (Rao: 1988, 24)

III. I. 3 Class in So Many Hungers:

Bhabani Bhattacharya has craftily designed the novel to point out the effects of war, famine on the socio-economic conditions in rural as well as urban areas. In the beginning of the novel, he specifically shows that society is “class-free” in normal times, whether it is in a big city like Calcutta or a small village like Baruni. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people in Baruni. For those along the river banks, fishing is an occupation. The rich rice crops and fish are wealth for these villagers. The village community comprises of artisans like the blacksmith, carpenter, the weaver etc. These professionals do not grow crops, but they exchange their goods for rice from the farmers, who also need clothes, ploughs etc. besides
food. They live a simple life. Thus the village is self-sufficient and everybody is happy and contented.

Calcutta is a symbol of urban life. The city life implies lawyers, merchants, traders, doctors and politicians. It is also a base of the foreign invaders. None of these produce food. They have to buy food from ‘the green bowl’ of the villages, which produce plenty. The villagers sell their surplus grain to the city dwellers.

Baruni and Calcutta are symbols of rural life and urban life respectively. As the World War and the National Movement progress, circumstances change simultaneously in the villages and cities, drastically changing the lives of people. It is necessary to trace the changes at this point, and to study the consequences of all the factors that affect human life.

**III. I. 3.1 Rural Life:**

It will be unfair to label Kajoli’s family as socially or economically low, just because they do not possess money. Their produce of rice and fish means riches to them. In that sense, the villagers can be considered at par, socially and economically, with the rich people dwelling in big cities. Action is quick in the novel and lingers only a little on the happy days of the villagers. One fine day, the government people arrive and confiscate the boats of all the fishermen. The very means of earning wealth is snatched away from them by force, in return for a ‘good’ sum of money. This is done in order to condone off the Bay, which poses a threat from the ‘Japanee’ invaders. The boats are burnt and destroyed. As they watch their dreams and hopes are also burnt. One of the fishermen looks upon this tragedy as a stepping stone to riches. He
thinks of building a new boat, which will be the only one plying in the river. He knows that goods have to be carried about from places. He decides to charge heavy fares and make money out of it. This man represents one of those who would shamelessly exploit his fellow-men for personal gains. Of course, the government is vigilant and does not allow his plans to succeed. The fishermen need rice but they have no fish to exchange for it. One fisherman who had distributed fish to every household on the occasion of his marriage represents his lot.

The next blow falls upon the farmers. The government forces them to sell rice, once again under the pretext that they are paying a ‘good’ price for it. Once again, the village shopkeeper sees an opportunity to become rich and set up a big shop at the district place. He knows the farmers personally and he knows how much rice each can sell until there is not even enough for them to eat. The next couple of harvests are also booked and the farmers have taken advance money for it. Kajoli also realizes that they have hardly enough to last for a month. Devata warned the villagers not to sell off all that they possessed. He is the wise one who can foresee the consequences. He is handcuffed and taken away to prison. He left his message to his people–

“Friends and Comrades, do not betray the flag. Do not betray yourselves. There is violence even in your thoughts: that is evil enough. Do not make it worse by violence in action. Ours is the hardest task. If we use the weapon of our enemy, we play in their hands. The supreme moment has come. Be true, be strong, be deathless.”

(pg. 20)
This is also the time of national uprising. Young hearts in the villages were surging with love for the motherland. Gandhiji’s appeals had reached every nook and corner. Kanu carried the tricolor in the protest march. He led other patriots like himself. Kanu and his father were also imprisoned, as were other young boys and men from every family in the village. The women and children were left to their fate, yet nobody cried. Not a drop of tears. Kajoli had carried the flag for some time. She was also a freedom fighter. Devata had always taught them to fight bravely. A wave of happiness came with Kishore, her father’s cell-mate. She was married to him but it was a very short happy married life. Her desperate efforts to grow some vegetables in the garden also failed. The ants were also hungry Mangala the cow devoured them. Finally, Kishore decided to leave for Calcutta to seek a job. Unfortunately, he was shot dead near the railway track and Kajoli became a widow.

Ill fate struck all the villagers. Little boys like Onu spent hours, risking themselves climbing tall trees and delicate branches to collect figs and fruit and tender leaves for food. Boys who had been friendly became enemies for the sake of food. The writer has shown that food is the basic hunger and all other hungers recede in the background.

The land was gone, cattle were gone. Plough and harnesses and cattle bells and instruments of the artisans lay idle. Rice was the foremost demand. Agents were appointed by city people to purchase rice and flesh. Many a villagers fell prey to their agents, attracted by trinkets and saris, but Kajoli’s mother was not one of them. Moreover, Kajoli was three months pregnant. The agents became rich as they took
full advantage of the opportunity. The victims became slightly richer than those who did not compromise. This created two more layers of economic strata - the merchants in cities.

The condition of the villages, once the ‘green bowls’ that supplied the city-dwellers with food became worst. They were driven to utter poverty. They craved for food. Thousands abandoned their land and homes and flocked towards the dream city of Calcutta, with the hope of getting work and food. Bhabani Bhattacharya has described some heart-rending events to give an idea of the condition of the people. A mother was burying her child alive to release it from the pangs of hunger. Vultures fed on the dead bodies all along the way. Human carcasses lined the highway. A pervert soldier satiated his sexual urges by giving Kajoli some pieces of bread. She was raped and lost her child. She would have become the prey of a wolf but Onu saved her in time. The soldier himself showed some humanity by taking Kajoli, her mother and Onu to a hospital in Calcutta in the truck. Lucky souls were spared the remaining distance on foot journey.

They soon discovered that they were among the thousands of destitutes in the city who had to manage on rice-gruel provided once a day at the Relief Camps. For the rest, they would pick from the garbage or beg or steal anything that they could. It is a dismal picture of thousands of destitute, reduced to skin and bones, unable to grow and flourish, with the prime thought of hunger. Clothed in rags and living on streets, hygiene was of no consequence. Bhabani Bhattacharya wants to show that this famine was not natural, but man-made. It was the result of war; soldiers had to be fed. Inflation was the result of war. Money was losing its value rapidly.
All kinds of hungers persisted in the city as well. The betel-leaf seller lured young girls like Kajoli. Kajoli was tempted to sell her body for the sake of her sick mother and little Onu. But the mother committed suicide, leaving the last rags of her sari for her dear daughter, as she would not need it after death.

Thus the family members perished one by one. They lost land, house, cow and other possessions. The sheer sense of hunger was the only thing that they were left with. This was the condition of all those villagers who once possessed land and plenty of rice. They were reduced to poverty. Along the way, some had lost their conscience and surrendered to temptations and selfish motives, thus enjoying a slightly better fortune.

The village Baruni and the city of Calcutta point out the socio-economic differences, the rural-urban differences. The village Baruni is an ideal village inspired by Gandhi-like figure Devesh Basu. The villagers call him Devata. He is a retired school-teacher. His well-settled son Samarendra Basu lives in Calcutta with his two sons – Rahoul and Kunal. Devata’s village is full of hard-working people. The family of Kajoli is one of them. The horrible effects of the famine are presented through the story of Kajoli and her family. The sufferings of the people who were migrating to Calcutta, the misery of the Indian farmers, various phases of human life and importance of human values are depicted vividly in the novel. The sufferings of the villagers in the famine and their wretched life in Calcutta showed them to face the vicissitudes of life. In Indian philosophy it is believed that suffering purifies the soul of its sins. It brings out its latent strength with the result; a person coming out an
experience of sobs and sighs is the nobler and better individual. The family of Kajoli is the real example of it.

The Second World War had spread to India and Bengal. The Japanese war fleet in the Bay had cordoned off Bengal. Province could be attacked from the sea at any minute. The government had seized and destroyed all the boats of the villagers along the coast as a protective measure. Though boats were the only means of transport and livelihood of a large section of the population Government did not care for them. After the boatmen, fishermen, the cultivators were affected, when the government requisitioned their paddy without controlling the price of paddy and rice. The peasants were soon reduced to poverty. They had scorched the boats. They had scorched the food. They would scorch the people. The villagers soon found themselves face to face with starvation because their rice was taken away by the British government. The war had wrought havoc. The villagers rushed in scarcity of food grain to the city with the false hope of finding food and job. The colonial rulers responded to the war by evicting the villagers from their land, draining the countryside of rice and by wrecking the boats. Their response to the national movement was to suppress it brutally. Their response to starvation was callous as ever. It showed how inhuman human being could become. The government policy had made the villagers homeless and landless.

*Balutedari* or Jajmani system in the rural India was based on the relationships between caste and profession. The village Baruni presents the picture of village economy, the dependence of all social groups upon each other. The village *kisan* whether landowner or landless labour works in the field and grows rice. The
fishermen sell the fish and buy the rice. The blacksmiths make ploughs. The carpenters make carts etc. The cycle of the village economy runs smoothly. Their needs are few. Simple life-style and belief in humanity make them content and generous. But the greed of one class changed the cycle. Greedy merchants destroyed their boats for security. A quarter of peasant families hold land on lease from the zamindar. Another quarter is a group of landless kisans, peasant labourers. Life of village Baruni centers on rice land and river. The villagers are not bright and civilized like city people, but they are content, simple and good people in their poverty. Devata says,

“The hundred million kisans of India must always be hungry. It is a rare gracious day to have the stomach full.”

Many peasants could not sell the land they had under plough because of the zamindar's lien of it. Tenant - proprietors would die rather than sell Mother Earth. The traders and their agents appeared in the village with a bag of rice, offering a bowlful or two to the peasants. The battle against hunger was intensified in Bengal. Human endurance ebbed. Hungry children cried to death. Streams of desperate men ventured out of their ancestral homes in search of food, hanging on to the footboards of railway trains. Then the men trekked the meadows and roads, ten thousand village streams fled to city wards. The city could not provide food to the refugees as the people in the city had never grown a blade of corn. People there had eaten out of the green bowl of the peasant's fields. It was true that the fields of Bengal grew enough rice for all. But in the famine peasants had been robbed of the grain. The traders took away the harvest, paying the market rate, but the cash dwindled in worth and in
the difficult times the peasants were compelled to pay tenfold to buy back the rice. They went to the city, hoping to get food in the wonder city of Calcutta. Villagers dreamt that they will get work, wages and their children will be employed in the jutemill.

The starving people did not show their wrath against starvation. There was no hunger riot in the land, no angry demand for food. The elders controlled the angry and aggressive youths by offering their own remaining little food. They appealed the goodness of humanity, consoling them by saying they are peaceful people. According to the old generation hunger was their fate, an expiation of the sins of past lives. The peasants' hands were bound with their antique moral tradition. Dr. S. P. Swain writes, “Catalyst of social change, the novel limn out the predicament of the contemporary human situation. It portrays the unflinching faith of the individuals in human values even in the teeth of all miseries and privations. Suffering does not snatch them away from values which they cherish high.” (Bhatnagar: 1999, 20)

The destitute had been hurt by hunger, many had died. They were too weak to walk to the free kitchen. Not only the poor villagers and peasants but many urbanites also suffered due to the famine. Ohin, a relief worker fainted from hunger in the classroom. Many students of the poor-middle class knew the pangs of hunger. Inflation had done its ruthless work, and they had edged very close to the pauper's level. The millions had died gasping for food. The uprooted millions broke in body and spirit. They were living simply because they were not dead. The trader would stay in the village, buying land and eatables. He was a vulture feeding on the miseries of the people. Each dragging step of the villagers would take a little portion
of remnants of their life. They looked like dehydrated sticks of humanity. The mothers helplessly looked at their dying children from long hunger. They blamed their fate. Help did not come from any corner of the society. While the rich traders took advantage of the scarcity of food to push up the price of grain and aggravated the misery of the poor, there were the scenes of great unselfishness and humanity. The peasants did not loose their fundamental goodness. One of the boys found a discarded jam can in the garbage heap with bits of jam sticking to the sides. Before he was picking it up another boy disputed for the tin. The first boy offered him the share of it. The girl received six rupees by exposing her bosom for the entertainment of the soldiers. She bought bread of six rupees to feed for the hungry boys who were not related to her. An old rustic who was using his ticket to get his daily quota of rice along with other destitute at the Relief Centre run by Rahoul handed over his ticket and told him that the food he was eating for some days had given him sufficient strength and so wanted to give the ticket to needful man.

The class conflict is exemplified by the poor destitute and the city traders. The have and have-nots come in front of each other at every turn but the have-not class accepts its inferior position without protest. They are helpless and defeated before the power of ‘haves’. The victory of the poor lies in their moral power. People writhed in hunger because of their meager income and shortage of food. It speaks volumes for the poor destitute moving from place to place for a sip of rice-water. The existence of the miserable beings is at the lowest animal level. The hungry boys fight with other boys and sometimes with dogs for possession of scraps of food. Dr. Swain comments, “The two fundamental strands of the Indian society – the materialistic
and the Westernized modern society of the urban folk and the traditional and
unsophisticated society of rural folk are at conflict within the self of the individual
generating the dilemma of existence. Whether to stick to this or to that, to do this or
that, is the problem. But the characters are not bedeviled and befogged in the face of
such social odds. Rather they emerge out of such a dilemma triumphantly.”
(Bhatnagar: 1999, 132)

Kajoli is the victim of the 1943 Bengal famine. She is a representative of the starving
and suffering people. Her father and elder brother were sent to jail for their
participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Her mother offers their family-
cow to the one who would need her most. Kajoli grew food for her kin and herself.
The stock of rice in her house was to last barely a month. Though they ate starvation
diet, dreading the day without rice left in the jar. She went about with mother and
Onu, collecting odd bits of food, shrimps from the ponds and water-weeds, green
wild figs from the tall trees, berries and roots from wasteland. The whole village was
absorbed in the same pursuit depleting the stocks of Nature's free food every day.

The soldier’s rape on her is a climax of cruelty. Man has not forgotten her flesh. The
soldier has a bread to offer Kajoli who begs him for food. She is too hungry to
consider the threat of getting help from unknown person. He observes her body in
the ragged clothes. He feels pity but was provoked by his manhood. He is sexually
starved. He leads her to a meadow. He tries to love her. A piercing shriek awakens
him and he finds that the girl is bleeding and unconscious. The soldier regrets his
deed. He brings out money from his pocket and ties it to a corner of her sari and
leaves the place. Kajoli has an abortion and lies unconscious. A jackal comes near
her by the smell of blood. Onu sees her and drives away the jackal. He immediately brings mother to help his sister. The repentant soldier tells army doctor to help the destitute woman. The kind-hearted doctor takes her in the truck and admits her in a Calcutta hospital. Kajoli is saved. She comes through it without any scars. She becomes bold and continues the quest for food in the company of her mother and brother. The story of her life shows that the agony of hunger is more intense than any other agony.

This event exposes the devil in a man who has the moral responsibility to save the destitute woman. Instead of it his sexual hunger spoiled the innocent girl’s virginity. The hunger of food is a great challenge to all. Therefore it is not surprising that Kajoli on her return from the hospital after her abortion and recovery; decides to become a prostitute in order to maintain her mother and brother. K. C. Mishra comments, “Bhattacharya seems to be suggesting through his portrayal of Kajoli’s character that neither poverty nor the pressure of the unfavourable circumstances in life should ever be given – to lead a woman to compromise with the dignity of being. Further, by being determined to follow a life of simplicity for others while keeping prepared for adequate and just sacrifice, one – woman or man – should live a decent and successful life.” (Mishra and Kumar: 2006, 12)

Kajoli was brought to Calcutta by the soldiers for medical treatment after the rape. Kajoli's mother and brother lived like stray dogs in the city while she was in tender care of the hospital. She got a bed to sleep and food to eat. Even a sari was given by a doctor. She didn't know the truth that her mother and brother lived in an ugly alley,
on the pavement. Onu prayed to be hurt in the bomb attack. So that he will be taken to the hospital. He will get blanket, rice and roof.

Kajoli decided to sell herself for money. So that she can feed her mother and brother and save them from starving and dying. Mother wishes to die. She leaves her ragged sari for her daughter before committing suicide because it was easy to die and difficult to live. Even then they silently suffered, accepting the sufferings as a part of their fate. They had no voice to protest against it. Kajoli and her mother barely had two saris between them. The starving weavers had sold their looms to the trader in desperation and wandered away. Onu and his friends wandered in search of figs. The tall tree of fig had delicate branches and it was dangerous to climb it up to top for little figs. His friend Vishnu had fought hard only to earn figs for starving child of his brother. Everyone wanted food for many hungry mouths in the house. Flesh-marketing was the easy way to earn money. Women were forced to do it unwillingly. The city woman offered a lot of eatables to Kajoli. Kajoli’s mother recognized the cunning plan of the woman who was involved in flesh marketing. Though they were hungry, they were not after cheap money. The mother threw the sweets and ordered the woman to get out with her evil plans. Onu became nervous. He was too small to understand the implications of suavity.

III. I. 3. 2 Urban Life:

A different story was enacted in cities and Samarendra Basu’s family is representative of it. Samarendra Basu was a lawyer by profession. He was radically different from his father Devesh Basu. While Devata was a strong willed man, a true
patriot at heart, Samarendra Basu was materialistic and selfish. He had been the butt of his rich fellow-students. A single incident like a friend emptying a tin of condensed Nestle milk, while he could not afford it, had decided his ambitions. His sole ambition was to earn money and give the best to his sons Rahoul and Kunal, to his daughter-in-law Monju and the little granddaughter Khuku. He was rich enough and had given good education to his sons. He owned a house, a car and ate the best food. Yet, he was never contented till the end of his life. When rice became scarce, he invested money in purchasing it and hoarding it so that he could sell at a good profit when demand would exceed supply. In every scarcity, he saw a business opportunity. When a drug was unavailable for his granddaughter’s treatment, he even thought of making business out of it. He traded shares in the stock market and took hasty decisions in the mad rush for money. He lost and learnt his lessons, yet, he was obsessed with money. Thus he, like all other rich people, became richer while the poor became poorer. Bhabani Bhattacharya wants to show that the gap between the poor and rich classes widens in the times of crisis and the middle is filled up by several layers, created as a consequence of greed.

There were many other traders like Samarendra Basu. One of them is Sir Abalabandhu, known as the ‘Prince of the black market.’ He is the Senior Director of Cheap Rice Ltd. He is a brain behind the strategy of huge storage of food grains and other necessities, including brothels.

Samarendra earned a fortune for his two sons through astounding success in the black market. He wanted them to enjoy the dignity and status which only wealth can give. But for whom he toiled all his life, never understood his sentiments. Kunal
joined the army and was reported missing while Rahoul joined the National
Movement and was imprisoned. He committed suicide in the end. Thus, his family
members also suffered and in spite of riches, the survivors were unhappy.

There are touching moments and moving scenes of poverty and sufferings of the
people on one hand and the heartlessness of the rich on the other hand. The famine
seems to be the natural cause of sufferings of the innocent men, women and children
of Bengal. The millions of destitute were trying to survive on

“......shrimps from the ponds and water weeds, green wild figs from the tall trees,
berries and soft, edible roots from wasteland.”\(^9\)  

But they soon finished. Hungry people were driven from their hearths and homes to
Calcutta in quest of food. They were subjected to further starvation and humiliation
in the city. The agony of hunger-driven people who had many times to explore ‘those
garbage cans’ which were their ‘food-bowls’ out of which they picked before the
‘city’s scavenger folk’ (pg.169) came with vans. Sometimes they picked food at
night through fight amongst them like animals over a dust bin.

The need of villagers is seen as an opportunity to earn money. Girish was a small
shop-keeper. He had saved little money to lend to needy peasants. He dreams of
making himself a big rice-dealer. He uses his skills to multiply money, keeping his
eye on the stocks of rice in the village. Girish was a shopkeeper and trader who sold
rice and other grocery items to the hungry peasants on credit at exorbitant prices.
Though he talks about charity, he takes advantage of scarcity of essential
commodity. He exploits the conditions to grow his riches. The greed for money
blinds him. The foreigners come from their countries to capture the other countries. They are out to become rich. They must grab others, make other folk poor. They force the villagers to leave their land. The fishermen were forced to sell their boats though the boats are their arms, blood and bone, heart and soul. The peasants are forced to sell their rice. They are consoled as

“You get your value - the right market price. Great money will see you through for a long time. You will sit at home like a lord and eat the good rice of ease and sleep a-plenty and speak the name of Hari and be happy.”

The villagers knew that they can earn money by selling the rice but they cannot keep money. They knew that money was a winged bird. It will fly off. The kisans wanted their lands; fishermen wanted their boats for their families. But the villages were going to pieces all around. The military had taken place to post troops and build airfields. People were cast out of their homes. The villagers lost both land and home. Shiv K. Kumar comments, “….the story of teeming million of this country who faces periodic outbursts of hunger and famine and encounter all the evil consequences flowing from such calamities: moral lapses and all the ghastly scenes that accompany a famine in India. Characters in the novel, like nomads, go in search of food and employment to distant parts of India only to have nostalgic memories of their homes.” (Gokak: 1957, 283)

III.I.4 Conclusion:

The two strands of families in two different locations, urban and rural, represent two classes, the rich and the poor. Their occupations, engagements and ambitions were
different but the basic need was food. The most important message that Bhabani Bhattacharya has given is that happiness does not depend on social or economic conditions. It does not depend upon money. This truth is revealed in times of crisis, like wars. War affects the whole human race, bringing out life’s realities, making them stand out bare. War brings out the various kinds of hungers – hunger for food, sex, money, recognition, research work and social status with both negative and positive consequences. War promotes undesirable feelings like hatred, selfishness, greed and perversity. Yet war cannot dampen the human spirit. In spite of human misery that pervades the novel, the chief characters represent humanity and values like love for the nation, sacrifice, brotherhood, compassion and generosity.

The novel also presents the injustice of the British Government. The history of colonialism has been the history of genocide, slavery, cultural thrust, religious conversions, cruel oppression, exploitation and suppression of the poor and political workers in the colonial period.

Social realism, with a social purpose, marks Bhattacharya’s works, showing its affinity with the works of Mulk Raj Anand.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is endowed with a transparently positive vision of life, explored and expressed artistically in all his novels. Since he believes that novels should have a social purpose, his stories abound in social and historical realities, quite often bitter and gruesome, like the Bengal Famine of 1943, the tragedies of the freedom struggle and Independence, evils of poverty and corruption, ignorance, superstition, exploitation, greed, sexual perversion etc. But beneath it, there is always
present the novelist’s unflinching faith in life and its invincibility indestructibility and worthiness. Malta Grover writes, “So Many Hungers reveals the tragedy of an era in which people writhed in hunger because of their meager daily income. Battacharya’s account of the famine of Bengal speaks volumes for the poor destitute moving from place to place for a sip of rice-water and against the utter indifference of the British Government towards a tragedy of gigantic dimensions.”12 (Grover: 1991, 60)

Patience and endurance, silent acceptance of the sufferings are the characteristics of Indian peasants. They love their Mother Earth a lot. They never think of selling the land for money. Selling of land is like selling one’s own mother. But they were helpless in front of nature, powerful force of the army and rich merchants. After all survival was the diminishing hope for them. Rahoul feels terrible sorry that

“…..there was no hunger riot in the land, no angry demand for food."13 (pg.107)

He knows the reason for the lack of protest. Though the hungry masses are thoroughly exploited and suppressed they are bound to the tradition of patience and endurance. He knows their mentality,

“….they would not rise in revolt that their stomachs could be soothed – a selfish personal end! They would fight and die over a moral issue. But hunger was their fate, an expiation of the sins of past lives. The peasants’ hands were manacled with their antique moral tradition. The rice-robbers were safe from peril because of the peasants’ tradition.”14 (pg.108)
Even in the midst of ghastly and heart-rending scenes of human sufferings and tortures, life asserts itself, sparking among ashes. From the assertion of ethical values and the synthesis of the old and new and of opposite extremes, emanates Bhabani Bhattacharya’s final vision of the affirmation of life.

Dr. C. Paul Verghese rightly remarks that “Food is the primary requisite of human dignity; hunger debases and dehumanizes man. That is why hunger is the theme of a large number of Anglo-Indian novels. Bhabani Bhattacharya has dealt quite forcefully with the theme of hunger and the concomitant theme of human degradation in his novels – So Many Hungers and He Who Rides a Tiger.”15 (Iyer: 2003, 34)

III. II. He Who Rides a Tiger

III. II. 1 Introduction:

If social class is the focus of the novel So Many Hungers! Bhabani Bhattacharya has focused on caste in He Who Rides a Tiger. Picking up the theme as it were, from where he left it in So Many Hungers, Bhabani Bhattacharya’s novel He Who Rides a Tiger further explores and develops his basic attitude to life. He seems to perceive all problems in all facets of hunger. These bizarre facets of hunger become conspicuous in times of crises like famine and war. With hunger as the central motif, Bhabani Bhattacharya investigates extremes like life of the rich and the poor, the low-caste and high-caste people, rural life and urban life. Ramesh Kumar Gupta writes, “He
presents the pestilence as hunger, not in fragments, but in its wholeness.” 16 (Singh: 2001,169)

B. Syamala Rao writes, “He Who Rides a Tiger is an attack on both who profited on people’s misery during the famine and those who exploited them as caste tyrants. It is a legend of freedom, a legend to inspire and awaken. Here he discusses a variation on the theme of hunger.” 17 (Rao: Retrieved on 19/9/2012)

Bhabani Bhattacharya has a keen sense of observation. He presents gruesome social and historical realities like the Bengal Famine of 1943, the tragedies of the freedom struggle and partition, and the evils of poverty, corruption, ignorance, superstition, exploitation, greed, sexual perversion etc. The consequences of famine are terrible. The peasants in the villages sell their land for food, the weavers sell their looms, the artisans dispose off their tools and fishermen sell their boats for firewood. There is no work in the villages.

”The plague washed up in fierce tides. Bengal was dying. Jharna was dying. .... People were flying from the hungry turn. Many were going to the capital city to seek a living..... The people had exchanged their pots and pans, furniture and trinkets for fistfuls of food grains.” 18 (pg. 20)

It is in this turbulent situation that the story of Kalo, the protagonist, is narrated. It brings out the tragedy in the life of the poor, the obsession of the rich for money and sex and the hypocrisy that underlines religious beliefs.
III. II. 2 The Story in Brief:

Kalo is a hardworking and skillful village blacksmith. He loses his wife during childbirth. He lives with his only daughter Chandra Lekha and an old aunt, who looks after the little girl. Right from childhood, Chandra Lekha is beautiful and intelligent. The innocent and doting father strives to give her the best of everything. He sends her to a convent school. The other girls often tease her, but she always stands first in the class, making her father feel proud of her. Jharna was a happy place where peasants and artisans made a fair living but it does not escape the blow of famine and war. By the time Chandra Lekha grows up to be a young girl, and while Kalo was contemplating on sending her to college for higher education, Kalo is compelled to go to Calcutta in search of employment. He goes with great hopes and intentions to settle there soon. So that he could take Chandra Lekha and his aunt there. However, he observes all along the way a picture of misery and suffering of thousands of destitutes like him. He manages to cling to the door of a first class compartment of the train bound for Calcutta. He steals a bunch of bananas. He is arrested for this trifle crime and imprisoned. Like other prisoners, he is made to work hard. He happens to establish friendship with a young fellow prisoner, whose number in the prison is B-10. He is wise and smart, good-natured at heart, but he never reveals his identity.

Kalo is released from jail after three months. He finds things worse. There is no food, no work and very little chances of employment. The only employment he is able to get is in a harlot house, much against his nature and inclination. Back in the village, his daughter is entrapped by a cunning woman in the trade and brings her to
Calcutta. She is brought to the same harlot house and just when her life is about to be ruined, Kalo saves her, in a rather *deus ex machina* fashion. This gruesome event, together with the painful experience of jail and the influence of B-10, he makes up his mind to revenge the society that is responsible for the sufferings of thousands of hardworking and honest men like him.

Kalo adorns his chest with sacred thread of the twice-born Brahmins. He performs a simple trick which is considered to be a miracle. He assumes a godly stature overnight. People had witnessed the ‘emergence’ of a Shivalinga as a result of Kalo’s ‘spiritual’ powers. A temple is built at the spot. People visit it from far and wide and donations and ablutions flow in generously. Kalo builds a house opposite the temple. He and his daughter are happy together, free from the pangs of hunger. Kalo appoints a beggar Vishwanath as the temple gardener. He learns that Vishwanath was also a blacksmith by profession. Kalo never forgets that he would never have been able to enjoy this glory but for B-10. On the day of B-10’s release, Kalo and Chandra Lekha meet him at the prison gates, bring him back with them. He refuses to give out his real name or caste. He only changes his name to Biten. Kalo lives under the pseudo name Mangal Adhikari. Thus, with the delicate support of the thread and the name, Kalo dares to ride a tiger, along with his daughter. Meanwhile, Chandra Lekha takes pity on a little destitute orphan boy and brings him home, showering all her affection on the poor child. They call him Obhijit. Chamdra Lekha, a practical woman agrees to get married to Motichand, a so-called respectable businessman of a high-caste and a trustee of the temple.
Finally Kalo and Chandra Lekha, supported by Vishwanath and Biten, own up their identities, give up their pretences and dismount the tiger. Kalo has courage to dismount the tiger at the critical juncture. Amidst great applause of the masses, they join the crowds, going back to their roots and showing their real, dauntless spirit and courage.

**III. II. 3 Caste:**

Mulk Raj Anand has painted the rigid structure of the caste system in India in his novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie*. Bhabani Bhattacharya also argues in the same vein, pointing out the same truth about the caste system. Yet, there is a remarkable difference in the way in which both the writers have handled the theme. While Bakha hates being an untouchable, he seems to come to terms with life at the end, relenting to the circumstances as his father did, believing firmly in its tenets and being honest to it. On the other hand, Kalo tries to tamper with a serious issue like religion, using it to his own advantage. He secretly enjoys the act of taking revenge on those who had brought about sufferings to him and his dear daughter.

Kalo suffers because of his caste. Although he is a skilled artisan his ways are not approved either by the Brahmins or by his own fellowmen. In school too, his daughter has to face the mockery of other girls. They never lose an opportunity of pointing out to her that she is the daughter of a blacksmith. The girl is not appreciated for her intellect and performance. This is the first great blow that Kalo experiences, not for himself, but for the sake of his daughter. Even when she wins the first prize in an essay writing competition in the entire state of Bengal she is not
appreciated. Kalo cannot overlook the fact that the magistrate’s daughter would have received a different treatment for the same achievement. The gold medal won by Chandra Lekha had no value. Ultimately, she was forced to sell it in return for food. Nobody applauds Chandra Lekha because she belongs to a low caste. The indifferent society and natural calamities racked him as well as all the villagers in Jharna. The honest, hardworking and skilled Blacksmith has to steal a banana to fill his stomach. When he is tried in the court, the judge labels him a thief and takes it for granted that he must be bad only because he belongs to a low caste. He has to spend three months in jail.

The only place for young girls of low-caste was a brothel. Chandra Lekha does not go there willingly. She carries on with difficulty even though she does not get any letter from her father for a long time. She is deceived by a woman and taken to a brothel in the city. Coincidentally, the father and daughter are united there. Kalo saves his daughter by running away from there. He is full of hatred for the strange social system, the oppression by the rich and high caste people and is desperate to take revenge on them. He succeeds in doing so. It is in doing so that the father and daughter expose the falsehood of the caste barriers.

The irony begins with Kalo performing the miracle. This irony is sustained till Kalo gives up his priesthood. Kalo is appointed as the temple priest and he rises to great heights in the disguise of Mangal Adhikari. While the richest people bow down to him, he muses,

“Look friends, see how easy it is to break the ageless barriers held to be sacred.”

19
He easily fools those bloated with caste pride. He shatters the old social order, as there is hardly anything substantial in it.

“He had upset the old social order by investing himself with Brahminhood and rising to the top..... What real difference did it make either to the social order to which he truly belonged or to the one to which he had attached himself?”

This is indeed true. As soon as he crosses the caste barriers and poses to be a Brahmin, the world is different. He gets lots of food and money, honour and respect more than he ever deserved. Bhabani Bhattacharya shows that the rich close their fists when it comes to feeding the poor but the same people spend generously for religious purposes. Religion always played an important role throughout the history of India. Brahmins, the highest in the social order, held all religious rights in their hands. They were unquestioned and accepted at their word. Religion was the life and soul of people. But a downtrodden Kamar in Kalo was in possession of their inmost souls which were corrupted by caste, cash and lust. He thus exposes the hollowness of the caste barriers.

The most acute irony lies in the fact that while Kalo assumes Brahminism by putting on the sacred thread, Biten shuns his Brahminism by casting off the thread. He wants to marry Chandra Lekha knowing well that she belongs to one of the lowest castes. Biten had witnessed the tragedy of his sister because of the caste system. Kalo’s hatred for the caste system is intensified by Biten’s graphic account of the tragedy of his sister Purnima. Her parents turn hostile to her when she wishes to marry a young
man of a different caste. Biten fails to understand why parents make their child’s life miserable simply because of their belief in the evil caste system.

*Biten observes,* “What evil power was it that, in a minute, turned loving parents into brutes? How could the force of belief be so blind and devastating? For, they who could have given all they had to make their daughter happy condemned her to a living death. How was such perversion possible?” 21

Tragedy in his sister’s life made Biten to hate and defy the caste system and Brahminism. Biten’s parents lacked the courage which Kalo possessed. He overthrew the bonds of the caste system to make his daughter happy, while Biten’s parents clung to them.

Bhabani Bhattacharya wants to show that the low as well as high caste people suffer due to the rigidity of caste discrimination.

As long as they rode the tiger, neither Chandra Lekha could marry Biten nor could Kalo give his consent. However, the moment they dismounted the tiger, their true selves are revealed. The culmination takes place in the union of Chandra Lekha and Biten with everybody’s heart-felt consent. Even Kalo knows that she would be really happy with Biten and she would never have been happy with Motichand. He was afraid whether she could sustain her pretence of being a Brahmin wife of Motichand.

Even though Kalo, Biten and Chandra Lekha changed their castes they find that they could not do so permanently. When it comes to happiness, the disguises fall off. They change their castes because of circumstances. They reveal their original castes willingly and triumphantly, only after they were satisfied by the revenge, when they
had exposed the superficiality of the caste system. Kalo makes a very meaningful observation on life as they march away from the temple –

“In life, sometimes, a big comprise has to be made.”

The caste barriers are very strong but Kalo by his actions proves that they can be broken easily and their falsity exposed without much risk. He says to Biten,

“Now I want to cry out to people, Look, friends, see how easy it is to break the ageless barriers held to be sacred!”

Biten and Kalo breaks the backbone of the caste system. He completely upsets the age-old social order by investing himself with Brahminhood.

Kalo is criticized for his presumptuousness both by the high-caste people and the people of his own caste. Kalo is unhappy with people of his caste because of their cold response and criticism. He maintains his distance, yet his heart is truly with his own people. His roots were deep in his own caste. The blacksmith is considered a low-born in the caste hierarchy. Though the caste is a water-tight compartment, a woman has a chance to enter the upper caste after the marriage. Chandra Lekha clarifies the positive side of her decision to marry Motichand. She agrees to be his fourth wife of Motichand for the sake of an orphan child Obhijit. He will be recognized as a Brahmin boy, he will get the superior caste identity. On the other hand Kalo thinks of calling his adopted son Obhijit a kamar.
The meanness and cruelty of society has changed Kalo from Kamar to Brahmin. The poor blacksmith is changed into the affluent priest of the temple. He remembers the oft-repeated words of his friend B-10 in the prison:

“We are the scum of the earth. They hit us where it hurts badly – in the belly. We have got to hit back.” ²⁴

Two important incidents - his imprisonment and his daughter deceit hurt Kalo's belly. The cruelty of society is unbearable to Kalo when he sees his daughter in the brothel. His anguish is intensified by the thought that she will always be condemned as a fallen woman because she lived in a brothel for a few days. He finds himself and his daughter too weak before the social conventions. His disguise to be a Brahmin priest is a part of his revenge. It is a bold attempt to attack the snobbery of the society.

The birth of a man in a particular caste is his social identity. The highest place is given to Brahmin in the caste hierarchy. The ancient blood is supposed to have run in his veins since the creation. The Brahmin is God’s gift. He alone can serve the spirit-food. He has sole right in this business. He has sacred thread on his chest. While still a boy, the thread is given to him with the set ritual. From that moment he is a Twice-born. Not all Brahmins are priests but all priests have to be Brahmins. Therefore Kalo wears the sacred thread like a Brahmin. He establishes a stone-image of Shiva. Kalo metamorphoses himself into a Brahmin, Mangal Adhikari. People gather in large numbers by his miracle- a Shivaling emerging through the earth.
All types of people gathered to see the miracle. The destitute are also among the audience. They hope that the deity will help them to remove their sorrow. The reputed citizens like Motichand and Sir Abalabandhu become associated with the temple management. The magistrate who had sentenced Kalo to hard-labour for stealing bananas was a worshipper. Money and materials pour in from all sides to build the temple. A big temple is built in a short time. The black-marketers have given money because the worship is atonement for all sins committed and a guarantee of success in future undertakings. He is surrounded by sages and politicians, leaders of industry and trade. He is very happy because

“He was scum no longer. He was going to be a pillar of society. A smith reincarnated a Brahmin.”

The caste barriers are very strong in the society, but Kalo easily crosses them. He is an avenger therefore he has broken the tight chains of caste. It happens only because he has seen the wide world of city and inhuman exploitation of the poor people.

Kalo learns from his own experiences in the city Calcutta that the low castes, untouchables are helpless creatures. They cannot dare to go to the police because of their poor class and lower caste. The caste barriers are great obstacles in the life of the man. But they can be broken easily. He says to Biten,

“Now I want to cry out to people, ‘Look friends, see how easy it is to break the ageless barriers held to be scared!”
Though a *Kamar* by caste and a blacksmith by profession, Kalo pretend to be a Brahmin and becomes the priest of a temple Shiva in the disguise of Mangal Adhikari. He befools the rich and the high-caste people. He is proud of his success.

B-10 (Biten) tells Kalo two professions can help him to earn money. He refers to Rajani, who runs a brothel. The rich and highly respected lawyers, bankers, pillars of society visit her regularly. The profession is prospering and new houses are started. Maidens have been brought from their parents, or stolen, or lured away with fair promises. Another way is to hit back the victimizers of the society by exploiting their faith in religion. B-10 tells him to wear a saffron loincloth, smear the body with ashes and mark a red-paste trident of Shiva on the forehead. Immediately alms bowl will fill up with money.

Kalo’s new avatar as Mangal Adhikari is a creation of the social cruelty. C. L. Khatri argues, “What B-10 aspires for is that the proletariat should be united and fight out the capitalists and the bourgeoisie with their weapon. In the name of God they have exploited and subjugated the poor and the humble castes. Now things should be reversed in the same way. Fraud and hypocrisy have to be countered with fraud.”

(Bhat: 2008, 17)

Biten himself cut his identity as a Brahmin due to his bitter experience. His sister was forced to marry in the caste when his parents discovered her love for a lower caste boy, Basav. Though Basav proposed Purnima, Biten’s parents become furious and immediately arrange her marriage with a widower. Purnima committed suicide because of the torture of her husband. Biten cannot understand the parental love
suddenly turned into cruelty only because of the caste. He throws his sacred thread and wipe out his identity of twice-born. He does not expose his name Bikash Mukharjee that indicates his Brahmin caste. B-10 was the number given in the jail by the police. After his release he assumes the name Biten. He discards his Brahmin caste when he sees the contradiction of values. The loving parents can change, they can mercilessly throw their own daughter in the well of death – it is shocking to Biten. He has changed after his sister’s suicide. He abandons his home and never indicates his caste. There is a fear to loose his beloved Chandra Lekha. When asked by Kalo, he tells “I belong to convict caste.” Biten works in the factory and lives in a big city. It shows that the industrial society can neglect the caste-barriers and caste-consciousness. Biten follows Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy. Gandhi worked to make the poor and lower people self-reliant. He wanted them to become aware of their own potentialities, become self-reliant and be free. The freedom of his conception was freedom from social discrimination, economic exploitation and political thralldom. Such freedom could not be achieved without self-reliance and courage. In this sense Kalo is a ‘hero’ for all poor class and lower caste people. Annihilation of caste is possible.

Kalo suggests to Biten that he should wear the sacred thread and call himself a Brahmin so that he may marry Chandra Lekha without shocking public opinion. He decides to prepare a good horoscope of his daughter. He wishes to arrange Chandra Lekha’s marriage with a Brahmin boy. He is curious to find out Biten’s caste. He agrees to accept him as a son-in-law if he belongs to Brahmin caste. Kalo’s success exposes the spread of sanctimonious elements in the society. Kalo’s fight is against
the system that produces the convicts, harlot agents, yogis. H. M. Williams justifies Kalo’s Brahmin sage as, “…in rage against the corrupt system, against the acquisitive society, Kalo perpetrates a successful masquerade by turning himself into a miracle working Brahmin.”\(^{28}\) (Williams: 1976, 93)

The treatment given to Obhijit by the pujari’s wife is the best example of the caste role. A curious small boy, Obhijit entered pujari’s kitchen. The priest woman was cooking on the oven. She scolded the little boy,

“Casteless waif. Boy from gutters! Dare you set eyes on a Brahmin’s kitchen? You will pollute the food with your breath. Then I shall have to give it to the dogs”\(^{29}\)

(pg.202)

There was no proof that the child was an untouchable. He was considered a lower-caste boy by his appearance. The master of the temple, Kalo had adopted him as his son. That was not enough to accept him as a Brahmin. He was treated as an untouchable. The casteless waif stepped inside the kitchen and ruined its sanctity. The pujari’s wife wanted to purify her kitchen with cow-dung. She wanted to throw away the food, break the earthen-ware pots and pans. But it would be reported to Mangal Adhikari and pujari might lose his job. The priest woman called Obhijit the ‘waif’ who had eaten crumbs from the gutters. It was plain to any seeing eye that he was no better than a peasant. Motichand was against Kalo to adopt the child as a son. He said to Kalo,

“You picked him up from the streets. He was often seen eating from garbage cans. He may be a chamar or some other kind of Untouchable.”\(^{30}\) (pg.206)
Kalo’s explanation shows his protest against the system. He says that it is possible a hungry boy from any caste would eat from garbage cans.

Kalo exposes his secret amidst a crowd – the trustees of the temple, guests, priests and pundits, the street sweepers, rickshaw pullers and porters:

“A downtrodden Kamar has been in charge of your inmost souls, souls corrupt with caste and cash….”

This leads to a clash between the proletariat and the bourgeois. Kalo gets the support of his people. The destitute are happy by his clarification; they cheer him “victory to our brother.” The support of the proletariat indicates the hope and confidence that he and his type could no longer be despised, mocked, trampled upon. Biten congratulates Kalo and tells him that his story will be a legend of freedom. The solution which merges at the end indicates the emergence of a new order based on the culture of humanism, underlining dignity and prosperity of the proletariat. Kalo has had his revenge upon those people in society who have been indulging in exploiting the poor and the needy. Hunger drove him from his native town, hunger took him to jail. He saw the face of so many evils. The situation changed when he pretended as a holy Brahmin priest. But he was not very happy with the mask of the Brahmin priest. He was attracted towards the poor, beggars, cripples and destitute. They also show their faith in him. They support him in loud cry,

‘Victory to our brother’
Kalo’s action of making himself the Brahmin priest is a bold and courageous action but that does not change his heart. He hates the idle routine of his priesthood. Kalo likes his smithy work. He secretly tries to work in the room but the smoke creates suspense in the mind of pujari’s wife. So he leaves his work in order to save his image as Brahmin. Kalo as a blacksmith is not allowed to work in his priest’s robes. The caste of the man regulates the norms of behavior, profession and etiquettes. Kalo’s mask of Brahmin priest makes him follow the traditions. For example, he suggests Chandra Lekha not to go with Biten whose caste is unknown. He refuses to accept Obhijit, an orphan child in the home. He suggests Biten to wear the sacred thread and then marry his daughter. The touch of Viswanath, the destitute makes him furious. He is conscious to follow the social orders of the caste-hierarchy. He behaves as a Brahmin because he is a Brahmin priest for the people. Sudarshan Sharma writes, “The author hits the hardest at the pre-conceived, inborn and deeply ingrained notions of superiority and inferiority, based just on the accident of birth.”

(Sharma: 1982, 103)

The deep-rooted caste-identity always makes Kalo conscious that he is a low-born kamar. It is not easy to change the caste as a robe. Kalo’s appearance as a Brahmin priest and thoughts as a blacksmith keep him conscious that he is a working class man – a smith. Kalo has to play a Brahmin’s role in his revenge play. He doesn’t choose the Brahminical role. It is thrust upon him because it is part of the trick which Biten has suggested. Kalo never really tries to become Brahmins. On the contrary whenever he is unconsciously pulled towards Brahminism, he resists the pull with all his strength. When Viswanath touched Kalo, he scolds for his touch. But later on
apologizes to Viswanath. His pride of the blacksmith is expressed in his words when Viswanath tells him he is a blacksmith.

“What need is there to be so humble? A craftsman honest with his iron and fire is as good as the best of folks. He can hold his head high because of the skill of his hands, his special knowledge. There is none better than him, I tell you. None”\(^{34}\) (pg.115)

Kalo and Biten’s protest is against the caste and against the merciless treatment given by the rich people to poor. Biten was sentenced to imprisonment having protested against a policeman beating up and kicking a hungry destitute who had stared at the food. They resolve to hit back the rich and the high-caste Hindus. Kalo tries to make people believe that God is not a Brahmin by caste. \textit{Kamars} deserve to go to heaven as people of any caste. Hunger eliminates caste and it doesn’t differentiate one man from another. Class and caste have no place in the presence of ‘hunger’. When Kalo opposes his daughter’s wish to marry Motichand, she says:

“I would at last be with you in your battle. That proud man would have a casteless spouse! He would eat food served by her contaminating hand.”\(^{35}\) (pg.220)

Kalo and Biten’s protest is against the social evils – exploitation and degradation in the caste and class system. The have-nots are ill-treated by the haves. The poor suffer a lot only because they are poor. If they are both – poor and lower, their suffering is endless.

When Chandra Lekha becomes the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss Kalo has no objection. Kalo wants a Brahmin bridegroom for his daughter. If she cannot get a suitable Brahmin husband she should remain a holy woman. His desire is to give her comfort
and luxury. He understands the value of money. But Chandra Lekha denies the
golden prison. She declares her decision to marry Motichand and live as his fourth
wife. She dares to sacrifice for her orphan brother Obhijit and for her beloved father.
She is practical. She thinks that her brother and father can get comfort and luxury in
the rich family of Motichand. Biten, a born Brahmin, shakes off his Brahminhood.
He wants to marry Chandra Lekha knowing well that she belongs to the low caste.

Kalo was honestly trying to get a job. He took up a job of a stretcher bearer to pick
up corpses of destitute people. He was shocked to know that he works for a skeleton
smuggler who was a doctor. He was tormented by the fact that those were the bodies
of the people of his kind. Yet he worked for money to save from hunger. When he
was driven out of that work for asking the due wages, rudely telling there were many
others ready to do the work. Kalo reminded Chandra Lekha who was dying of
hunger he unwillingly went to Rajani and accepted the job of a pimp. The double-
faced morality changed Kalo’s simple, straight-forward nature. He thought that he
had done nothing really immoral. He had just stolen from the rich a little bit out of
their abundance. He was unjustly locked up in prison. Kalo was shocked when he
was really doing an immoral profession by serving at the brothel; he was not
condemned as a bad man. He was rather treated respectfully even by policeman.

The Bengal famine widened the gap between the villagers and townsman. The
village economy was partly destroyed by the city traders, black-marketers,
capitalists. They were busy cashing in this calamity. The village economy based on
agriculture, fishery, handicrafts and other trades was ruined by the city traders.
Lands, tools of the artisans and other household things were purchased by the rich
city traders and Jharna was reduced to a ‘hungry town.’ Starving villagers moved to the city on footboards of the train crying,

“Hungry, we die…..Give us a few grains of food, Baba….Give us a ride to the great city. Food enough in the great city, food even for dogs and cats…….Take mercy on the dying ones, Baba, permit us to leave.”\(^{36}\) (pg. 28)

Women were forced to take to prostitution to get rid of the hunger. Hunger was of two kinds: the hunger of the rich, black-marketers, the oppressors and the hunger of the poor to meet the bare sustenance of life. Kalo’s daughter Chandra Lekha was taken to a brothel. Kalo rescued her. The thought that she will always be condemned as a fallen woman without her fault pained him. The society will call her a fallen woman because she lived in the harlot house. This incident also changed Kalo’s views. He decided to fight against the accuser, the centuries old traditions.

**III.II.4 Social Class:**

In this novel too as in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie* and *Untouchable*, it is observed that class is the consequence of caste. However Kalo makes a bold attempt to break through the caste boundaries. He also rises upwards in social class. That is why, Motichand, a rich man of a high-caste, does not hesitate to propose to Chandra Lekha.

Kalo’s decision to send Chandra Lekha to a convent school is his first step towards a higher social class. He has money enough to give her good education. He has never enjoyed certain privileges in life because of his caste, although he deserves them. He does not wish his daughter to face the same fate, hence, he sends her to a good
school. Chandra Lekha is both beautiful and intelligent. This shows that neither of these two qualities is the sole characteristic of the rich. In fact, she excels the rich and the high caste and tops the essay competition. Unfortunately, although clever, she is part of the downtrodden lot and is hit by famine along with the entire lot. In spite of her good education, she does not get an opportunity to rise higher in society. Like all the destitute young girls, she is tricked into the flesh trade.

When Kalo becomes the temple priest, Chandra Lekha also receives different treatment. Both father and daughter are highly revered for their so-called spiritual powers. Kalo comes in contact with the richest people and the same rich people who had ‘sent him to’ jail for being poor, touch his feet and seek his blessings for more wealth and riches.

Bhabani Bhattacharya has shown a few representative characters who are extremely rich and have high status in society. The rich are portrayed as ever greedy for more wealth. They never bother to shower favours on the poor. They never hesitate to offer milk and ‘prasad’ and sweets to appease the ‘idols’ of God so that they can become more rich. With the support of money; they can have their own way. Every time Motichand marries a new girl, he gets rid of the previous wife by providing her with enough money to see her through life. The rich think that they can purchase happiness with money. They also think that they can do as they please and wash away their sins by making rich offerings at the Shiva temple.

Kalo initially finds himself and his daughter too weak and helpless before mighty social conventions. Then he dares to reject the long-cherished values. He is
determined to cut his social taproot and throw away his inheritance. He knows that he has done nothing wrong. He has not committed any sin. By stealing a banana, he had just stolen from the rich a little bit of their abundance. He always longed to purchase instruments and continue with his honest profession. He never liked to be associated with the brothel. He is condemned as a bad man for taking a banana to fill his empty stomach. He is shocked to see that when he is really associated with the immoral profession of prostitution, he is not condemned as a bad man, but is rather treated respectfully even by a policeman, the so-called protector of justice and goodness.

Kalo’s character shows that a man has unlimited sympathy and support for the people of his own class, and contempt for those of other classes. This is evident when Kalo sees the poor dying miserably under the impact of ravenous hunger created by the rich for their profit. He reflects thus on the tragic lot of the poor:

“Was heaven meant for the rich alone?”

III.II.5 Conclusion:

The novel is the story of a protest against the ill-treatment of the poor by the rich. The protest is against two prevalent evils – the evil of exploitation and the evil of caste. Kalo and Biten protest against exploitation and caste respectively. Kalo’s story illustrates the novelist’s belief in human beings. Kalo and Biten succeed in taking revenge on the rich and high-caste Hindus. The novel is an attack on some of the repulsive realities of Indian social life. One of the realities of social life is the unbridgeable gulf between the rich and poor, the high and low. Kalo is able to show
the rich how superficial are the boundaries of caste and class. Yet, he remains faithful to his own caste and profession. His, “strength seemed based on an inner metal.” In the end, he becomes the champion of the downtrodden and a ‘legend of freedom.’ The writer sheds light on the lofty, unbending ideals of the people of the working classes. Even ravenous hunger fails to subdue the poor, and make them take the viscous ways,

“The lowborn people will not bend but they will crack. God has sent his mighty hunger to teach the lo-born people a true lesson.”

Kalo’s Brahminhood is a beginning of new era. Biten’s rejection of caste identity and love for Chandra Lekha is the beginning of new social order. Kalo is able to befool the caste-Hindus and the rich easily thereby proving the vulnerability of the so-called high-born people. He becomes the champion of the down-trodden and ‘a legend of freedom.’ Biten’s annihilation of caste is the powerful social attack. The denunciation of the caste system is the need of the nation. It is exposed that caste has become a habit of thinking therefore difficult to eradicate.

“All men are born equal”

Kalo alias Mangal Adhikari’s lesson can teach a lot to caste and class conscious Indian society. Kalo’s protest is successful. Such artistic creations can change the society. It is a visionary novel. The author quite boldly attacks on the society through his representative characters. Kalo and Biten’s protest is against the social and economic system which degrades the human being. Their protest is against the established social order which make social difference and labels men as superior and
inferior because of their accidental birth in the particular caste. K. R. Chandrasekharan writes, “The juxtaposition of Biten’s rejection of the Brahminhood which is his birthright and Kalo’s renunciation of the Brahminhood he had created for himself through fraud makes the novelist’s condemnation of the system total.”

(Chandrasekharan: 1974, 69)

It is essential to note Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s appeal in 1936. He said, “It should be better if priesthood among Hindus was abolished….the priesthood must at least cease to be hereditary. Every person who professes to be a Hindu must be eligible for being a priest….It will certainly help to kill the Brahmanism and will also help to kill caste….”

(Sen: 2003, 198) Kalo and Biten had done it and proved that it is possible to protest against caste to establish new society.

Bhabani Bhattacharya mounts a strong attack on the distinctions of castes, classes and creeds. Kalo perceived the contradiction in social life:

“While men died of hunger, wealth grew; and while kindness dried up, religion was more in demand.”

(pg.113)
References:

4) Bhattacharya, Bhabani. So Many Hungers, Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1978, p. 20
5) Ibid. p. 25.
7) Ibid. p. 132.
10) Ibid. p. 55.


14) Ibid. p. 108.


17) Rao, B. Syamala, [http://yabaluri.org/TRIVENI/CDWEB/drbhabanibhattacharya\n
yaasanovelistapr71.htm](http://yabaluri.org/TRIVENI/CDWEB/drbhabanibhattacharya\n
yaasanovelistapr71.htm) *Nectar in a sieve*


21) Ibid. p. 160.


24) Ibid. p. 41.

25) Ibid. p. 86.


30) Ibid. p. 206.

31) Ibid. p. 226.

32) Ibid. p. 231.


35) Ibid. p. 220.

36) Ibid. p. 28.

37) Ibid. p. 54.

38) Ibid. p. 21.

39) Ibid. p. 110.

