So Many Hungers! the first novel written by Bhabani Bhattacharya was published in Bombay in 1947. Unfortunately, at the outset, this novel earned such an unfavourable review in one of the local newspapers that Bhattacharya felt that he was not destined to be a creative writer. But when it was published in England in the same year by Victor Gollanz, it caught the appreciating eye of the Communists. Later, this novel was translated into Russian (1949), Czech (1950), Slovak (1951), Polish (1951), German (1954) and Chinese (1955) languages.

So Many Hungers! may best be described as a “personal” novel, embodying Bhabani Bhattacharya’s individual reaction to the holocaust years (1944-45) when Bengal passed through a nightmarish time, its economy shattered and its children living at the raw edges of their emotional experience. It was a period that seared the imagination of the creative writers of Bengal, while it tested the forbearance of a hungry humanity. It was the time of a veritable chaos of values when human destiny underwent a new baptism of fire. It is a tribute to the genius of Bhabani Bhattacharya that in a theme with which he seems emotionally involved he should have succeeded in depicting character and in organizing plot with a commendable degree of impersonality.

This novel is one of the finest pieces of creative writing by Bhattacharya. It is born out of the agonized torment of the body and spirit of Bengal. Bengal was plagued by a severe famine in 1943, a period concurrent with the early years of the second World-War. There is a depiction of the Quit India Movement of 1942, the mass uprisings, acts of sabotage which followed
in its wake, the indiscreet and the distressing scenes of human misery and degradation resulting from the famine which swept through the land and starved millions of people to death. The novel also holds that the condition was a man-made problem in which two million men, women and children died because of black-marketeers who hoarded bags of grains to cash in upon them later.

As the name itself suggests, So Many Hungers! shows the widespread hunger for food caused by the famine in Bengal and it becomes tolerable only in the name of God, for peasants consider hunger to be "their fate, an expiation of the sins of past lives". The tragic fact was that this hunger which played havoc with the lives of the people was man-made. "The empty stomach was due to no blight of Nature, no failure of Gods, it was man-made scarcity". The people who caused this misery by hoarding rice and by indulging in black-marketeering are Samarendra Basu, Sir Abalabandhu and Seth Girish. These inhuman men force the poor and hungry people to sell their possessions, even their lands to satiate their hunger. Many peasants like Kajoli and Onu live on roots and figs. Under such conditions the agents of brothels also take advantage and lure mothers and young girls with food and money. And, when all these things end the peasants last resort to get relief from hunger is to leave the village for the city as Kajoli does in the novel. There are many scenes in the novel which are nerve-racking and shattering: the mother trying to drown herself in the Ganges, a jackal eating the flesh of a hungry

2. Ibid., p.105
woman, a starving mother going on eating without giving any attention to her son dying slowly, a mother burying her child alive and a girl of six years being sold to a procurer for ten silver rupees. By showing such scenes, Bhattacharya wants to make us realise that the rich have dismissed their conscience for the greed of money. The poor and the rural people show an extraordinary sense of moral values even in the midst of dire poverty. The scarcity of food that transforms rich people into soulless, money-minting machines ennobles the poor and the wretched to angelic heights. The sharing of an empty jam tin by two street boys, the submission of a food ticket by a destitute, the act of a girl photographing herself with white soldiers for feeding the destitute children and the mother giving away her cow, Mangala, to a needy woman are noble acts inspired by the hunger of the poor and the wretched.

The novel consists of two plots: the story of Samarendra Basu’s family with young Rahoul as the central figure and the story of a peasant family with a young girl Kajoli as the principal character. The first chain of events involving Samarendra Basu’s father, Devesh Basu, who is respectfully called Devata by everyone, and his eldest son, Rahoul, deals with India’s struggle for freedom in the early forties. The second series of incidents represents, in miniature, the pathetic fate of millions who suffer immensely from the consequences of the famine, caused by the selfishness of profiteers and the relentless indifference of the British Government. The link between the two plots of the novel is Devesh Basu, who is the “de jure” head of the family in 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 as the village people call him, is the source of inspiration to Rahoul and Kajoli, the two principal characters of the novel.
The novel begins with a brief reference to World War II and then there is a shift in the narrative, which switches over to Monju's hard and heavy labour pangs causing concern to every one in the family. Rahoul, her husband is greatly upset to know from his mother that the pains will continue for at least half an hour more. At the end of this chapter Monju is relieved from labour pains and gives birth to a baby girl. Rahoul's brother Kunal is also introduced to us in this chapter. He joins the war as a commissioned officer, happy to make an adventure of his profession but his parents are sad at this news for they do not want their son to go to the front to fight.

Rahoul is a Cambridge-returned young scientist. He is dedicated to his work and enjoys living in Calcutta in a luxurious family. One day, all of a sudden, due to the outbreak of war in Europe and the intensifying movement for Independence, he changes his mind and wants to be of service to his country. Rahoul, even after acquiring the highest possible education in science, believes that his grand father, 'Dadu', will infuse him with trust in existence, as soon as he goes near him. So he goes to meet him at the village called Baruni. Here he meets Kajoli, one of the major characters in the novel. As the days pass and the air of the city becomes heavier and heavier with the stench of the dying, Rahoul throws himself into political activities. His father, Samarendra, however, is very different. He has inherited none of the grand-father's idealism. He is a clever lawyer with a hunger for wealth, and tries to exploit the war situation by hoarding rice, to make quick money later. He is represented as the economic exploiter. But Rahoul's hunger is different. His is "hunger self-fulfilment as an intellectual, as a scientist, as a freedom fighter, as a worker for social reforms". Sometimes these various hungers come into

1. Dorothy Blair Shimer, Bhabani Bhattacharya, p.29
conflict with one another pulling him in different directions like a wind-tossed kite, till he moves towards his most powerful hunger—the hunger for freedom. Rahoul soon joins the Quit India Movement and is imprisoned for anti-establishment activities. He comes out of the prison because of his father who tells the Government that Rahoul is doing research on cosmic rays and that he might discover a "death ray", which would be useful to the Allies. But Rahoul's heart is with the people of Bengal who are suffering from the artificial famine caused by the indifference of the Government on the one hand and the callousness of the heartless hoarders on the other. He witnesses the terrible scenes of human suffering like starvation death on the road and a baby sucking the breast of a dead mother. He runs a relief centre for the destitute, even while the spies are after him. Ultimately he plunges deep into the movement and starts speaking to students and inspiring them to action. His father who has contributed to the war funds is awarded C.I.E. His brother Kunal, it is learnt, is missing in the war, in all probability is dead. Rahoul is taken into custody for his anti-Government activities. Rahoul is an intellectual, a teacher scientist, who is stirred to the depths of his soul both by Gandhi and Nehru, by what they said and did during those momentous days of struggle. It is his student, Prakash's burning patriotism and sacrifice, which touch him to the quick. It is now that he has come to identify himself with the destiny of India and the suffering people. His experiences as an activist mature him and he is ready to accept his physical suffering with equanimity of mind and a hope in the freedom of the country and the people of India.

Kajoli's, in contrast, is a tragic tale of suffering, profoundly symbolic of the suffering of the masses. She is a fourteen year old peasant girl and has spent her childhood within the comfortable security of the family and village routine. She is basically good and simple and is a charming and fresh girl:
“This young girl has a keen fancy for pictures of a bright colour; she hangs them up all over the mud walls. Her longing for beauty finds expression that way.”

However, these simple pleasures she could not enjoy for long. Inspired by Devata’s patriotic fervour her entire family plunges in the Movement. First her father is dragged to the prison, to live in the jail-house for his efforts to help his country achieve Independence. Then one by one every male member of the family is put into prison. Due to famine, they cannot store much food, and the little food stored is likely to finish soon. Then the day comes when the granary is emptied and there is nothing in the house. In such conditions Kajoli’s husband Kishore, sent to her by her father, is forced to leave his beloved wife when she is five months with child. He sets out to go to the mighty city, Calcutta, but it is death that destiny has in store for him. On the way he is shot dead by a police guard. And what is more wretched is that Kajoli never comes to know about her husband’s plight right up to the end of the novel. With nothing left in the house, she and her mother eat roots and figs for some days, but that, too, soon finishes. In distress she, along with her mother and brother, leaves her only treasure, her home, this village of Baruni, where her childhood was spent. When on their way to Calcutta, a worse tragedy strikes her. An Indian soldier, whom she begs for food, gives her bread and prompted by his own hunger for sex, rapes her, leaving her bleeding due to abortion. But along with this crime he also does good to her by pleading with the Military doctor to admit her to the hospital. With Kajoli in the hospital her mother and Onu, are thrown to the streets of Calcutta to fend for themselves. Both Mother and son starve along with other destitutes. They

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungrers! p.28
sleep on the streets and forage in garbage tins for food. Released from the hospital and restored to her mother and Onu, Kajoli for the first time realises how miserable they have been. And then she makes her “grim decision. She would sell the last thing she owned—Herself”¹. At the end of the story Mother decides to drown herself in the Ganges but before doing this she takes off her sari, which could be used by Kajoli. Kajoli also decides to turn to the brothel for a living when advised by a betel-woman to do so, but while going with that woman, she sees Devata’s photograph in the newspaper and remembers his advice: “Be strong. Be true. Be deathless”² and she turns away from the brothel and becomes a newspaper-vendor. Kajoli ultimately represents the will to survive, the determination to go on with the business of living and the unflinching spirit to fight courageously. She and Rahoul have reached the same stage. Her newfound courage-to-act arises from the depths of her womanly self. Thus, viewed as a whole the novel succeeds in conveying a vision of suffering, struggling India, discovering life in death and fashioning her destiny with courage and hope.

Through different characters like Samarendra Basu, Bhattacharya shows that such people are infected by the diseases of greed, temptation and exploitation and the people like Kajoli, her mother and Onu are eloquent examples of the sterling qualities of the rural people. Rahoul represents the middle-class intellectual devoted to the dispassionate pursuits of his research and responding to the country’s call for liberation. The town and the village are represented by Calcutta and Baruni and the two sets of values—materialistic and spiritualistic—respectively by Samarendra and Devesh Basu.

¹.Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.191
².Ibid., p.195
The theme of the novel is the Indian predicament in the context of the global crisis of the Second World War, with the situation of the Bengal famine dramatically highlighting the Indian condition of being subjected to severe exploitation, which in consequence evokes all the human hungers—for food, for freedom, for adventure, for social prestige, for home, for sex and for knowledge.

Through his novels Bhabani Bhattacharya gives his vision of the affirmation of life. Chapter-I of the book begins with the short paragraph referring to World War-II. Then, we are told about Monju’s hard and heavy labour pangs worrying everyone in the family. Rahoul, her husband, is greatly upset to know from his mother that the pains will continue for at least half an hour more. Though at first this short duration appears like an age to him, yet in no time does he recover from despair because he is wedded to a clear vision of joyful life. On the very first page of the novel, the author comments: “But he pulled himself to the calm, soothing inflamed thoughts with joyous vision”. The strength of Rahoul’s optimistic view of life lies in his faith in the lofty values of life—such is Bhabani Bhattacharya’s attitude towards life, and he presents it time and again in the novel. Even if war is to be won, victory is to be based upon values. When Samarendra asks Rahoul how long the World-War will last; the latter answer: “Till the new epoch is born”.

Similarly Chapter II opens with a bright new day, filling Rahoul with high hopes. He is free from the strains of the night before, when Monju was writhing in agony and transmitting her despair to his nerves. Monju has become a mother with her baby as the image of joy and the Allied powers

2. Ibid., p.9
have declared war against the Swastika. In his blood, he feels “the voice of India throb”—the voice of India which has always been an affirmation and not a negation of life. In this mood, he thinks that even the Hindu taboos, which seem odd and are dying fast, evince “an inner purpose if you looked beneath the surface.” It is this “inner purpose”, embodying certain fundamental values, that makes Bhabani Bhattacharya’s vision of life strikingly affirmative. Rahoul is convinced that suffering purifies human beings.

“In the agonies of war, the soul of humankind

would be cleansed. Humankind after the war

would not be the humankind of before.”

Rahoul highlights the greatness and goodness of life again and again because, as his wife remarks, he feels “for all humanity.” He is disgusted with the Allies when he realises that their war activities are not actuated by high ideals. Consequently he thinks that the new world order with joy and happiness is just an impossibility. Before going to Cambridge for higher education, he was profoundly influenced by his grandfather’s idealism and joyful approach to life. The old man moulded his ideas and stirred his imagination. As a visionary, he gave no place to marriage in the picture of life he then had for himself. He was opposed to Indians fighting against the English because he believed that life was noble and that the people were “good everywhere.”

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.12
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p.13
4. Ibid., p.18
5. Ibid., p.21
When the man-made famine breaks out he is one of those few persons who offer free help to suffering humanity. His wife, thus, unfailingly sees “her husband’s true spirit, his hunger for a happier life for the common man”  

Through Devata, Rahoul’s grandfather, the novelist explicitly gives expression to his faith in the greatness of life. Since “the divine bliss fills his heart with riches”, he is called Devata by all those who come in contact with him. Rahoul, even after acquiring the highest possible education in science, believes that Dadu will infuse him with trust in existence, as soon as he goes near him: “Dadu would show him the way as of old with renewed faith”  

Flinging aside selfishness and all the comforts of life, Devata becomes one with the poor village people whose welfare is the aim of his life. He represents an ideal with all its indignity, courage, grandeur and strength. He who comes in contact with him is infused with hope and strength. This is why when Rahoul is gloomy and idle, he thinks of Dadu and looks forward to seeing him to get hope and strength from his transparent vision: “Dadu would strengthen his spirit, Dadu had strengthened him ever in the past with his clear faith and vision”  

Kajoli is also an incarnation of faith in the nobleness and fullness of life. She inherited the fundamental values and manners of India, unaffected and undefiled by modern attitudes and motions. Speaking of her Devata says to his grandson, Rahoul: “She has a legacy of manners as old as India. How could she give up her manners and proprieties to suit your new-fangled city”

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.168
2. Ibid., p.23
3. Ibid., p.24
4. Ibid., p.108
ideas?”1. This is the basis of her unswerving trust in the worthiness and greatness of life.

The novelist depicts his men and women as true fighters, courageous and fearless. When the British Government arrests Devata and the father of Kajoli for participating in the Freedom Movement and the entire family is left unprotected and helpless, no one in the family cries and weeps. Believing in the life and in the nobility of their actions, they are gay and unafraid of hardships and death. When young Kanu, the last male member in the family fit to work properly in the fields is relentlessly taken to prison, no one cries this time.

Chapter-VIII begins with Bhabani Bhattacharya’s conviction that even the humble villagers are an embodiment of robust life, full of energy and fearlessness. They are strengthened and not subdued, by oppression and terror. In the absence of father and Kanu, Kajoli and young Onu, who have never before done a farmer’s work, gleefully and vigorously reap the harvests under the scorching sun. For the first time in her life, Kajoli realises that the peasant earns every grain of corn at the expense of innumerable drops of sweat:

“Not that she was down hearted, defeated. Dadu’s granddaughter! Those last words he had spoken before the ‘Red Turbans’ took him away: “Do not betray yourself. The supreme test has come. Be strong. Be true. Be deathlessness”. And she, listening, had felt a power in her!”2.

The last few words in the above extract express a strikingly positive view of

1.Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.28
2.Ibid., p.77
life. Persons like Kajoli and Onu are essentially noble and are much above greed and temptation. When the agents of profiteers persuade them to sell their rice by giving them various kinds of temptations, they remain firm and unaffected. Kajoli affirms: “She would sell rice to the homeless folk and to none else”\(^1\).

To show his affirmative belief in life, Bhabani Bhattacharya depicts even the small boy, Onu, facing the famine heroically and also inspiring others to do so. The little children live on figs, wild roots and herbs, having no rice to eat. They strive hard to collect these eatables for themselves and their dependents. Onu is a great fighter and does not lose hope even amidst extremely adverse circumstances. He has an inexhaustible fund of kindness, courage and hope:

> “Onu loosened the strips of his waist-cloths and took out half the figs to offer them to his friend.
> “Every day we’ll go halves, bhai, halves. That tree has plenty left”\(^2\).

Onu hopes that the tree still has plenty of figs left. Likewise, the novelist believes that though at times life may appear shorn of joy, hope and strength, yet in reality it is never without plenty of these. Onu is overpowered by despair and dread, but he does not weep before his mother and sister. Even at the risk of falling down from the top of the tree, he is determined to collect a lot of figs in order to save his mother and sister, and the little brothers and sisters of his friend, from living only on herbs and roots. He does not escape from the tragic situations of life, but rather escapes into them.

\(^1\) Bhabani Bhattacharya, *So Many Hungers!*, p.80
\(^2\) Ibid., p.116
The feelings, thoughts, conviction and actions of Kajoli’s mother evince Bhabani Bhattacharya’s faith in the ethical values and grandeur of life. Though all the members in her house are almost starving, she does not sell the cow, Mangala simply because they love her deeply and are grateful to her, as they have been nourished on her milk. These famished people have high ideas, and rise above selfishness. The starving old mother is an embodiment of compassion, unselfishness, strength and hope. She gives her dearest Mangala to save her and her infant’s life and also shows her high hopes and determination that she may live a bright and gay life in Calcutta without herself knowing much about that city:

“Why, girl, you can go to Calcutta city: you never thought of that!”... “Your fisherman is already there, may be. You will get milk a plenty in the wonder city and rice and a new sari to put on.”

Similarly when the old mother, Kajoli and Onu are forced to leave their village for Calcutta due to the non-availability of food, they are grief-stricken. But then we learn that they are so because their house, which has been no less than a sacred temple to them, becomes a habitation of death and hopelessness: “The temple became a deathtrap. It had no hope, only hunger.” Bhabani Bhattacharya artistically avers that man should fly from such a place, howsoever dear it may be to him. He reveals the anti-death drive if his characters, thus projecting his affirmative vision of life. When these three set

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.123
2. Ibid., p.133
out for Calcutta, they get encouragement and hope even from the miserable uprooted people. Staggering sore footed towards their destiny simply because they are human beings: “Those destitutes, more worn than they and no use to them, yet gave them strength for those were people”¹. These lines evidence the author’s conviction that man, even in a state of utter hopelessness and despair, imparts hope and strength to others. The novelist shows the emergence of new hope and energy even in misery: “New wicks of strength burned in her. In desperate crisis she had made herself strong for her children. And her children, too, were strong for mother and for each other. Weakness in one would have destroyed all”². These men and women tide over the crisis, thus reflecting their creator’s positive attitude towards life.

The novelist makes human beings derive joy and loveliness of life from natural scenes and sights at a time when they are overwhelmed with despair and bitterness. For instance, when Kajoli’s mother, amidst extreme hardship and grief, passes the night with her children in the open unsheltered fields, she suddenly glances at a swarm of fire-flies which comfort her, dispelling gloom and anguish. She feels “as though the tiny points of light were a sign, a message from the Image of Light. On to the city of a million lights! The city of humanity. The city of civilized living”³. Again, when Kajoli finds no spark of life left in her, the novelist makes her conscious of joyful life by letting her suddenly feel the child stir in her womb.

The novelist repeatedly stresses some of the basic human virtues in order to bring out the splendour of life. For example, when Kajoli is lying

---

1.Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungrers!, p.134
2.Ibid., p.138
3.Ibid., p.139
unconscious with abortion resulting from rape and a jackal is about to eat her bleeding body, Onu, who is terribly afraid of jackals because of his belief that ghosts appear in the form of such cruel animals, courageously fights against it. The scene indicates the victory of life over fear, defeat and death. Besides courage, faithfulness and manliness, the other virtues frequently emphasized in the novel are remorse at wrong-doing, selflessness, kindness, dignity, self-respect, gratitude, hard labour, etc. When the soldier sees Kajoli having an abortion as a result of his sexual act with her, he is obsessed by the wrong he has done to the famished pregnant girl. He gets comfort only when he is able to save her by placing her in the hands of a qualified doctor. The mother of Kajoli is overwhelmed with this kindness and she says: "Kindness seemed to have gone from the face of the earth, and now it poured on her so unexpectedly".

The young boy Onu, in a state of utmost misery and helplessness, is shown, having a vision of a dignified, bright future life based upon hard work and self-respect. In the same chapter, we hear the author’s voice expressing his unswerving faith in the inextinguishable glow of life:

"Out of the flame of travail that has consumed one woman a glow quickened in another, an understanding, a humanizing tenderness, so that the creatures of misery were no longer a race apart, soulless and dead men and women all."

Bhabani Bhattacharya exquisitely manifests his affirmative vision of life in the heroic act of a destitute maid, who makes the supreme sacrifice of

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.150
2. Ibid., p.168
showing herself naked to men for the sake of giving food to the helpless, famished people. She is called "the mother" by suffering humanity for whom she is life and joy: "Life stirred in the dim, dismal lane in the instant of her coming." She has the bearing of a princess. Though she has abased herself by selling her modesty, yet even Rahoul, an ideal man, himself, is enchanted by her purity of spirit:

"But Rahoul... felt as though he had glimpsed the sanctity of the human spirit, and was dazzled by too much richness and beauty. That was the streak of light to illuminate the gloom of his heart."

On the same page, there is the description of an aged destitute villager who is truly an incarnation of the nobility of life. Though too weak to walk, he holds out his card of free food to Rahoul, imploring him not to deny him the joy of seeing a more needy person eating his share. This fills Rahoul with pride and hope. The old man is, in fact, the embodiment of gratitude, goodness, selflessness, dignity and hope. Time and again, the novelist portrays the invaluable richness of life in the midst of miserable and horrible scenes and episodes.

He projects his vision of life, not only through his virtuous characters like Devata, Rahoul, Kajoli and others, but also through a profiteer and moral offender like Samarendra Basu. When this man was a student, a rich classmate humiliated him by denying him the taste of condensed milk. It was at that time that he had vowed to fight against poverty and provide his children a life without the miseries and insults of poverty. The writer asserts his affirmative

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungrers!, p.185
2. Ibid., p.186
belief in life by showing Samarendra Basu successful in realising his dream in quite a short period. He is shown believing in "creation out of annihilation". He dwells upon this theme zealously while talking to Mr. Sideboltom about World War-II and Rahoul’s scientific researches. He is also presented as a man of immense hope and courage. When his younger son, Kunal, who is in Army service, is declared missing, Samarendra Basu, though deeply shocked, does not give up hope: "Dread shadows lurked behind the hope, but he would not look at them, he would keep his mind averted". Though a bed and undignified man, he takes pride in the heroism of a son, Rahoul, when he is arrested by the British Government. In his attitude towards war, too, Bhabani Bhattacharya expresses his positive view of life. He points out that though war is massacre of humanity, yet it is desirable if it is used as a means of freeing the world from a blight.

In the last chapter of the novel, the author eloquently illustrates his faith in an affirmative view of life. 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. She upholds the high ideal of self-sacrifice. At this critical moment of her life, she recalls the past and sees before her mental eye, her father, Kanu bhai and her husband, who were all great fighters and fought undauntedly for one or the other noble cause: "Undefeated, all. No jail-house could ever break their spirit". Consequently, her eyes gleam, and she feels "new strength in her feet and power in her spirit". She decides to sell copies.

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.38
2. Ibid., p.199
3. Ibid., p.196
4. Ibid., p.197
of the newspaper "Hindustan" to earn money, and this causes a sudden lovely
smile to appear on her graceful face. As a result of this, she gives a powerful
smack on the plump cheek of the betel-woman, who persuaded her to
accompany her to a harlot-house. This last act is significant, as it suggests that
she defeats evil and wards off moral death embodied in the betel-woman, and
returns to a healthy life. Likewise, Rahoul's arrest brings out the heroism
of man. He is completely self-possessed and free from the fear of suffering and loneliness. He is only worried about other people. When Monju, his wife, comes to know of it, she is not shocked but she is
"calm, strong with some hidden strength", and declares that she will also go
his way soon. Through him, the novelist illustrates his conception of high
life—life "without hate, without anger in a nirvane of passionlessness".

The last three paragraphs of the novel, present the novelist's view of
the greatness and richness of life. Rahoul, who has witnessed the spectacle of
the endless miseries of the famished uprooted millions reaches prison:
thronged with people beaming with exultation. The author affirms:

"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 last illumined by new dawn".

So from the above analysis it is clear that in the major scenes and episodes of
the novel, Bhattacharya has presented the unswerving conviction in the
brightness of life.

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.203
2. Ibid., p.204
3. Ibid., p.204-05
Another major theme dealt with in this novel is, the theme of hunger. “Like every great writer, Bhabani Bhattacharya is also obsessed by a theme, a personal and compelling experience”\(^1\). His central preoccupation with the theme of hunger is evident in the entire corpus of his creative writings. The Bengal famine, which seized his mind and hunger in one form or another has haunted him throughout his literary career. He understood that Imperialists had reduced the state of the Indian farmers to utter poverty because of their innate greed and selfishness. This was further aggravated by the unscrupulous Indian merchants, traders and money lenders. Bhattacharya has created such merchants in his fiction who are “entirely free of social conscience”\(^2\) and heap lots of wealth by cornering all the grain of the market and selling it at skyrocketing prices. This drove the poor to the wall and hunger stared them in their face. It is this poverty, which is the root cause by many social evils that prevail in our country. Hunger was a common phenomenon amongst the poor peasants but it assumed epic dimensions during the famine of Bengal, 1942-43.

*So Many Hungers!* is primarily devoted to man’s hunger for food, though it also closely analyses man’s other urges. It is a story not only about so many hungry people, but also about many types of human hunger which vitiate human nature. The novelist himself remarks that he has included certain other types of hunger as the theme of his novels: “The story was concerned with all the intensified hungers of the historic years of 1942-43, not food alone; the money hunger, the sex hunger, the hunger to achieve India’s


\(^{2}\) Bhabani Bhattacharya, *So Many Hungers!* p.175
political freedom”\(^1\).

The novel begins with Rahoul’s hunger for a new world order founded on eternal ethical values and higher ideals. Though a scientist, he is essentially a man of ideas and ideals and is haunted by the desire to see the advent of a new epoch dominated by higher values and ideas. This is the reason why he becomes fretful in his heart when he discovers that the Allies during World War-II are fighting for victory only and not for the values and ideals:

“The new world order was an empty dream? 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”\(^2\).

Rahoul is obsessed with the desire to create a new enlightened world order out of a world in ruins. Being a visionary, he also longs to achieve “cosmic light” and mental peace by transcending ordinary day-to-day life. His own unique hungers make him oblivious of the ordinary hunger for food or freedom. But he is worried about the common people. He reflects:

“Why could he not escape from the oppressive darkness of Bengal far into cosmic light? That was his true concern. Not the people’s hunger for food or freedom, for he had his own separate hunger. His own hunger was his true concern.

Why had he lost his intellectual poise? He knew

\(^1\) Bhabani Bhattacharya, Contemporary Novelists in the English Language, ed. By Suresh Kohli (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1975) p.149-50

\(^2\) Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.21
in his spirit the hungers of his people. And they were his hungers, too.\footnote{1}{Bhabani Bhattacharya, \textit{So Many Hungers!}, p.108}

More than Rahoul, Devata who has passed his seventieth year, lives amidst the villagers at Baruni far from the affluent life of his son and grandsons in Calcutta, because he finds the illiterate and nearly uncivilized rustics essentially good, having unfailing trust in human values. He says to Rahoul:

"I am proud of my people. They are not bright and knowing and civilized!—like you city bred: but they are good people. Centuries of hardship and strain have not destroyed their faith in human values."\footnote{2}{Ibid., p.2}

He has become one with the poor village people whose welfare is the primary aim of his life. He has not only the hunger for ideal life, but also 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. Rahoul always looks forward to meet him so as to get strength and hope. Even Kunal, Rahoul’s younger brother, has a thirst for basic human values. Without caring for his parents, he goes to World-War-II to play his part in the great event. He affirms that the English are deeply devoted to high ideals and values which they cannot bear to lose. He talks to his elder brother about doing good to a fellow-being, and tells him that one of the noblest acts a man can do and which truly counts, is to help a man solve his food problem. He himself does such an act by resigning his post, so that someone else may have a chance to get it.

Bhattacharya artistically portrays hunger for food as the most

---

2. Ibid., p.2
fundamental reality of human life and in this respect lie is very close to Freud. The book paints a detailed and graphic picture of the Bengal famine of 1943, which is a heart-rending scene of starvation and death. Everywhere in the villages of Bengal, people are undergoing terrible pains of starvation. People have nothing to eat, not even the root of plants. Innumerable men and animals die of starvation. Hunger actually eats them up. Hungry children cry themselves to death. Millions are uprooted. Abandoning their homes and relations with unutterable agony, they go to the big city of Calcutta just to see their hopes of a better life:

"Streams of desperate men ventured out of their ancestral homes in search of food, hanging on to the footboards of railway trains, riding on the sun-baked roofs. But the police threw up barriers. Then the men trekked the meadows and roads, ten thousand village streams flowing citywards." 1

Ironically, the city where these people go has never grown any corn: it has only consumed the corn products of the villages. Scenes of horror are common. They could be seen anywhere on the footpath. The mother kills her own children for want of milk and food; the hungry infants are seen sucking the breast of their mothers who have already died of starvation: the mothers sell their daughters and even send them to brothels for the sake of food without comprehending the full import of their actions; and pregnant young woman like Kajoli have "the breasts ripe because of the pregnant womb, yet small from famishing." 2

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya. So Many Hungers!, p.111
2. Ibid., p.130
People know no other word except food, but there is no food to satisfy their hunger. Corpses and vultures are visible everywhere in Bengal:

"A myriad vultures gazed down upon the country side. Corpses lay by the road, huddling together. Picked to the bone; only the hair uneaten—fluffy baby's hair, man's hair, the waist long hair of woman. A family group had sunk into sleep: and beyond the sleep were—vultures".

Vulture-eaten corpses keep company of famished uprooted humanity, moving sore-foot towards Calcutta in the hope of getting food. To Kajoli and other starving people, life has shed its young dreams. They see jackals eating hungry people lying unconscious because of hunger. All that Bengal has yielded and all the hidden roots of the earth have been plucked clean, boiled and eaten away. In spite of all this, there is no word in the Government circle or among the wealthy about this enormous hunger and terrible devastation of the peasants. Kajoli, in a state of extreme hunger, eats the entire bread which she perchance gets from a soldier, without thinking about her hungry mother and brother. And 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. Then she is sexually harassed resulting in her 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 satisfies his longstanding hunger for sex. Like Kajoli and others, ten million peasants groan under such unbearable hunger, while rice is being moved out of Bengal. Though public

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya. So Many Hungers!, p.137
2. Ibid.: p.144
charity runs many free kitchens, yet hundred thousand die of starvation every day. Many of them are not even fit to eat solid food and need a special diet called glucose. So when they take the ordinary food, they die. So people died due to starvation for there is lack of food and many others die due to food being given to them after months of hunger. In both cases hunger had to die. Some other destitutes are shown eating the skin of banana taken from a garbage heap. Consequently, most of them suffer from dysentery, and the roads and streets are all detestable dirty and unhygienic. Often even peels and rotten vegetables are not available to the unfortunate villagers. “The destitutes” says the novelist, “became a race apart, insensitive, sub-human”\(^1\). Many pregnant women die of hunger before they can give birth to their little ones. There is in the novel an extremely pathetic description of such a young woman lying dead near Rahoul’s house:

“A young expectant mother about to make new life and denied, cast out on the street, till at last she could not bear the struggle, and with her unborn one, she was but refuse for the corpse-disposal squad”\(^2\).

Man and animal fight to get holds of the remains of morsels in the dustbins:

“Destitutes and dogs in those days often fought for possession of the rich city’s ten-thousand rubbish-heaps. in which scraps of rotting food lay buried. It was not every time that the destitutes won, routing the dogs on the streets and the dog

\(^1\) Bhabani Bhattacharya, *So Many Hungers*, p.166
\(^2\) Ibid., p.168
within themselves.

Hunger makes human beings inhuman, and quite often the starving men quarrel fiercely for a little bit of food. The ravages of hunger compel a mother to eat food, while her child is lying dead in her lap. Hunger also impels a young girl to show herself naked to men for the sake of getting food for herself and her near and dear ones: “Aware, sensitive, she debased herself this way because of desperate need.” People hurt by bombs during those days are promptly taken to hospitals, but nobody bothers about those who are hurt terribly by hunger. That is why when Onu gets some money he invests that money to buy flowers for the goddess and prays that:

“Mother, I only ask this much: let a Japanese bomb hurt me Mother. Then the motor-wagon with one red stripe down and another across will come and pick me up and take me to sick hospital. They will give an iron bed to lie on, and clean piece of cloth to put on, and may be, a blanket to wrap myself in against cold and food—all the rice I can eat, Mother.”

Bhattacharya in treating the theme of hunger for food in So Many Hungers!, presents it not in fragments, but in its wholeness. He not only describes the gruesome scenes of famine in Bengal, but also delineates its physical and moral aspects in all their ramifications. Through Rahoul, the novelist assesses

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.171
2. Ibid., p.185
3. Ibid., p.190
"the deeper implications of the famine, the over-all effect"¹, taking into account its physical as well as moral reverberations. Rahoul reflects on the physical side of the famine thus:

"Death would claim two millions, perhaps three millions more would escape by the skin of their teeth, but they would never be strong again, especially the children and the rickety babies who had so little succour who had been exposed much to sun and rain. That was the physical aspect of the story"².

The author brings out, in detail, the inner degradation, the moral implications of human hunger for food. When hunger bites people hard, the finer feelings begin "to be deadened"³. For example, a starving mother continues to eat food at a free kitchen, even though her child dies in her lap. Then there is another instance of depravity caused by hunger. A destitute woman gets some rice after persistent effort throughout the day. When at sunset she lightens fire and is about to take rice along with her three children, a hungry man pounces on her and runs away with the grain. Hunger debases the younger brother of Kajoli, Onu. He is a noble young boy who has grown up under the idealism of Devata. He always had the habit of sharing his best possessions with his friends. But hunger has destroyed his idealism. He has lost his warm and innocent spirit. "He had become a hoarder. He hoarded for himself and his sister and mother, the wild green figs on tree tops which none but he could

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.181
2.Ibid.
3.Ibid.
If hunger had a deleterious effect, it also engendered goodness and nobility. Even the moral uprightness, dedication to ideals and unselfishness of people withering with hunger has been amply demonstrated. For instance, Onu, in the beginning, faces the famine heroically, and also inspires others to do so. When there is nothing to eat in the village, he is determined to collect a lot of figs so as to save his friends and himself. Then, the starving old mother of Kajoli is an embodiment of compassion, and unselfishness. She gives her cow and some grains of rice to save an infant and his mother. Even after knowing that she and her children Kajoli and Onu are also there to live, to survive, she indulges in this act of generosity. Then there is an aged villager, too weak to walk. He gives back his card of free food to Rahoul with the request that he should not be refused the pleasure of seeing a more needy person eating his share. "The richness of the human spirit! Rahoul could have laughed at the oppressive dread he had felt".

Bhattacharya scrutinizes the cause of the fearful malady of hunger for food. Through the soldier who succeeds in raping the famished pregnant Kajoli with his offer of bread, the author raises the questions:

"why were these innocent people doomed to hunger and death, while the army had rice and wheat to squander? Who but the peasants had created the food grains—not the colonel, not the Brigadier, not the Jungi Lat, C-in-C".

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya. *So Many Hungers!*, p.115
2. Ibid., p.187
3. Ibid., p.149
The novelist does not reply to these questions directly but we come to know through the novel that three factors are responsible for the Bengal famine: the profit motive of the profiteers like Sir Abalabandhu, Samarendra Basu and others who hoard food grains for making money and thus create scarcity; the World War-II which causes the destruction of crops and the urgent need for food grains for the future; and, the utter indifference of the British Government because of the fast-spreading National Movement culminating in the Quit India Movement.

This novel also portrays man’s craving for sexual fulfilment and money. This is illustrated by the life of Sir Abalabandhu, the “prince of the black market”. He has a curious character. He is the Senior Director of “Cheap Rice, Ltd”, and has spread corruption on all sides. He is among such depraved men who are storing a huge quantity of food grains. He has come to Bengal from another province and has amassed a great deal of wealth. The British Government has bestowed upon him extraordinary honours. He has achieved in full measure the two fold blessings of wealth and aggrandisement, and yet he is not satisfied with his life. Along with money and titles, he is also obsessed by sex. Like the destitutes have hunger for food, Sir Abalabandhu has hunger for sex:

“The man had a curious complex, however, he took an odd pleasure in relating the sex adventures of a person he called “my friend”. under the thin disguise of my friend, So Samarendra and others felt sure, even if they had no evidence in support of their belief, he expressed

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.173
his own shameless perversion. an innate morbid streak. He is very particular about indulging in the sexual act with a young virgin. He frequently describes, in detail, his friends numerous sexual acts with various young girls. A girl's first sexual act with a man is the favourite subject of his conversations with his friends. He is fifty years of age, but he is always very careful to look young. His hair is dressed by a Chinese barber and his silk suits are prepared by an English tailor. He spends money lavishly for having sex with the destitute maids. "Entirely free of social conscience" he is of the view that brothels have become big business and that there is a fine balance between demand and supply in this sphere of life. He says that "the famished ones must feed well before they go into business—feed on rice and ghee and milk, so that their bones may put on meat. Hair to be rid of lice, smoothed. A hundred other details. It pays no better investment in the whole money market". Though he has a wife and children, he talks shamelessly about sex. He suggests that the new post of Controller of Brothels should be created and that his friend is most suitable for this responsibility. His hunger for more and more riches and sexual pleasure is explicitly reflected in all his talks and actions.

Another character, Samarendra Basu, is an embodiment of man's unending quest for money and the glamour of titles. He is one of those traders who ceaselessly accumulate wealth and buy land and things. He is a vulture feeding on the sufferings of human beings. "Rich, he hungered to be still

2. Ibid., p.175
3. Ibid., p.176
richer\(^1\). He has grown astoundingly wealthy, and is also awarded the title of C.I.E. When he was a student, one of his rich class-mates insulted him by denying him the taste of condensed milk. This incident makes him vow that he will make every possible effort to get rid of his poverty. He passes through the difficult years of struggle. His hunger for money does not extenuate with the advent of old age, and he is always obsessed by the desire to give his children all the material pleasure of life:

"His sons should have all the condensed pleasures he himself had wanted in vain—he would take care of that. His fist had clenched: whatever the cost, he would take care of that"\(^2\).

World War-II is a very favourable opportunity to collect money. While countless people suffer due to starvation caused by profiteers like him, he is absorbed in the vision of a bright and happy future life of his newly born grand daughter:

"And the little one in the house, she now in her eighth month, she would be reared in luxury, jeweled like a princess, she would move proudly in society, and when of age, have a big dowry and wed an officer high up in the Imperial Service"\(^3\).

Thus Samarendra’s company, and others like it, are successful far beyond their original expectations. And that very success hastened the death and starvation of men, women, and children all over India.

\(^1\) Bhabani Bhattacharya, *So Many Hungers!*, p.176
\(^2\) Ibid., p.32
\(^3\) Ibid., p.31
"Anti-social elements [found] their opportunity
to make individual fortunes from human blood
and hold their countrymen to ransom while a
million and a half poor, helpless and innocent
people died a lingering and painful death due to
sheer hunger".

So Many Hungers! also focuses on India’s hunger for political freedom. The Indian National Movement forms an integral part of the narrative which discusses the Quit India Movement of 1942, especially its nature and scope in Bengal. Nehru’s statement during his trial in Gorakhpur prison is cyclostyled and distributed all over India. The statement concludes with a forceful remark about the country’s hunger for political freedom, food and security. "There are more powerful forces at work today than courts of law; there are elemental urges of freedom and food and security which are moving vast masses of people”.

Hunger strike—that is another variety of hunger but is not given by God or Capitalists. It is self-imposed hunger. Indians fighting for the freedom of the country resort to hunger strikes quite frequently under the impact of Gandhiji, who uses it as a powerful weapon for political and other purposes. When Bengal groans under the impact of the famine and cries with the all-pervasive starvation, the patriots, crazy with the urge for freedom, resort to hunger strikes. Dadu or Devata who is a prisoner in Dehradun jail-house, launches a hunger strike. His fast unto death creates a sensation throughout the

1. B.M. Bhatia, Famines in India, 1850-1945 (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963), p. 231

2. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p. 44
country because of the publicity in the newspapers. His hunger battle makes Kajoli conscious. “She saw him in jail-house in the garb of a convict; wielding his body’s hunger like a sword. strong as ever and true and deathless.”

Thus through Kajoli’s family and other destitute characters Bhattacharya demonstrates his sympathy for the poor and the destitute. To sum up the whole theme of hunger Kajoli’s family serves only as an example of how the starving simple village folk make their way to Calcutta in search of food, only to be subjected to new humiliations and persecutions and to be lured into evil. The poor wretched women expose themselves to shame and dishonour. Bhattacharya is constantly drawing our attention to the pressure or circumstances responsible for their moral degradation. What else could they have done to stave off hunger or to keep the wolf from the door? They look more sinned against than sinning when we see apparently decent and respectable people, beguiling others by disguising themselves as sheep, demanding with the money they command gratification of their kind of hunger—bestial in its lustfulness and sensuality. The poor and helpless victims are in some cases shown to be submitting to the defilement of their bodies in order to be able to support those depending on them—almost in a spirit of self-sacrifice.

Freedom is also an important recurrent theme in Bhattacharya’s novel. He examines the theme of freedom in various forms such as political, economic and social. He lived in a period when the entire India was immersed in the struggle for freedom from the British Yoke. When he was a young boy Gandhiji had assumed the leadership of the Freedom Movement. There were social evils eating into the nation’s vitals. A battle had to be fought against

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungrers!, p.195
them in order to lead India to her destined place among the developed countries of the world. This was possible only when people had attained freedom of the mind and "the freedom to be free". Hence Bhattacharya lays emphasis on these two varieties of freedom.

The author had closely witnessed the entire National Movement, specifically the Civil Disobedience and the Quit India Movements, which have been particularly treated in this book. Along with the Bengal famine, which is its main theme, some of the important phases of the National Movement are also depicted in the narrative.

The novelist faith in freedom finds forceful expression early in the novel. Rahoul is very happy and hopeful to know that the Allied Powers have at last declared war against the Swastika in order to keep the soul of man free from the "death-like strangle hold" of Germany. He feels joy to indicate that the Great War will preserve man's freedom in consonance with his ideas. He himself craved for freedom for all, that is—World freedom—and longs to lead and organize the freedom fighters of the world:

"World forces were dancing to his tune. Had he not often in his fancy mobilized an international army of freedom-seekers and declared war on fascists?"

But Rahoul is upset, since he is unable to understand how England, one of the Allied Powers, can fight for democratic freedom, while she is denying freedom to India. It is a matter of great irony that Indians, who live in bondage, are asked to fight for world freedom. He says to Kunal, in anger and disgust: "But the Champions of freedom abroad were the eaters of freedom in:

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.11-12
this land". But he deeply desires that freedom should prevail in Europe and Asia. He has always wished to participate in the wars of liberation. He tells his wife Monju, how he feels sore because of his having missed opportunities to fight for freedom. Once he wanted to go to Spain to save freedom, but could not do so. He says to her:

"I had an urge those days to join the army of liberation. Ralph went. Many others I knew went. I kept back. I had an excuse: science I could serve humanity better that way. And I came back to my homeland. Some sore in me throbs now and then. A greater war of liberation has started, the greatest ever. What am I to do this time?"

His story in this novel "is a representation in miniature of the struggle for Freedom".

The breaking of the salt law is also referred to in the novel. Early in the story, the Civil Disobedience Movement is briefly, but effectively, described. Devata actively participates in it. Like great patriots, he organizes a large number of peasants and fishermen, and the defies the law by making salt from sea-water. He and thousands of others are sent to prison for breaking the salt law. The movement spreads over the entire country. It catches great momentum as almost everyone is ready "to break the salt laws and be rushed to prison". Consequently all over India, no fewer than a hundred thousand men and women go to prison in a month.

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya. So Many Hungers!, p.41
2. Ibid., p.16
3. K.R.Chandrasekharan. op.cit., p.11
4. Bhabani Bhattacharya. So Many Hungers!, p.21
Devata, one of the major characters in the novel, is depicted as a local Gandhi inspiring others to join the freedom struggle. He goes to jail several times and guides the people by his example and advice. Rahoul, his grandson, is inspired by him and joins the struggle for the liberation of the country. He realises that this is of crucial importance at a time when millions are dying of hunger in his state, Bengal:

"Sadness dimmed his eyes, haunted by the endless vision of misery. The millions who had died gasping for food. The millions who had yet to die of disease".

He strongly determines to liberate his country from the aliens. He says to them:

"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!".

The novel vividly describes the National Movement. The old and the young, irrespective of caste, creed and sex, plunge into it. The movement spreads in villages because the leaders give priority to village reconstruction work, which it is thought to be the very basis of the Indian way of life to come. When the movement emphasises the importance of mass literacy, the alien rulers regard it as dangerous. For it would, they know, "make the trampled ones conscious of their birth right—the right to live as human beings".

---

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya. *So Many Hungers!,* p.204
2. Ibid., p.202
3. Ibid., p.26
The novel deals with India's dilemma during World-War-II: whether she should oppose the British Government or support it to fight the fascist forces. The dilemma is resolved by the decision to fight with the British people against the Nazis. It is felt that Indians are to oppose the British rulers, and not the British people who are in danger of losing their liberty. Indians are to side with freedom and democracy and not with tyranny and enslavement. So the National Movement "offered co-operation, pledging its full strength to the war effort, in return for recognition of the Indian people's right to freedom". This movement founded on sound morals, does not stop supporting English people in their effort to save their freedom from being endangered by fascists forces. "It would not hurt Britain in the grave hour of trial. That would not be ahimsa—true non-violence. The National Movement had more morality than strategy".

There is Jawaharlal Nehru's cyclostyled statement, which is circulated while he was in Gorakhpur prison. It brings out Indian nationalism, determined to achieve complete independence for the country. It emphasizes that the British Empire can never suppress the freedom loving millions of people in India. It also points out that nothing in this world is more powerful than the elemental urges of freedom, food and security which preoccupy the vast masses of India. Desire for freedom has caused a tremendous excitement throughout the country, leading to agitations everywhere. Police starts "Lathi charge" to stop the agitation.

Quit India Movement is on its highest peak. But the Government is determined to crush the movement and to outlaw it. On the other hand, the

2.Ibid., p.51
patriots are convinced that an enslaved enfeebled India will be a blot on world freedom. Thus the storm is in full fury, and many freedom fighters go underground. Terror prevails in cities and villages. Thousands move from place to place, carrying with them the tricoloured national flag. Authority waylays people, searches them and kills them. Most of the flags have a number of holes in them made by bullets. The flag-saluting ceremonies are organized even in villages and leaders like Devata speak “the new mind, the new words of the national movement”. Women participate in these ceremonies as enthusiastically and courageously as men. Through Kajoli, Bhattacharya portrays the participation of even the helpless women of the village in the national struggle. She determines to be true to the command of Devata, and is ready to sacrifice her all at his command. All behave like true fighters. Thousand of men and women are insulted, beaten up and arrested. In many families there are no adults to work in the fields to earn livelihood and look after and to look after the family. This is exactly what happens in Kajoli’s family when her father and elder brother are sent to the prison. The students play their roles. They revolt and are ready to resort to terrorist activities. The student’s movement grows stronger and stronger. They become one with the masses, the soldiers of “Free India”. The freedom struggle assumes new, terrible dimensions:

“Mean time they stayed in prison, sixty thousand men and women and the bulk of them were peasants. A thousand killed, twice as many wounded. Many had been hanged after hurried trial—peasant leads had gone to the rope crying with their last breath.

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.70
"Victory. Victory to freedom!"\(^1\).

The Quit India Movement enters a new phase with the prisoners launching hunger strike. Lovers of freedom—men, women and children—carry on the movement even in jails. With uplifted handcuffed arms, the prisoners are as active and zealous as people outside the prisons. They have vowed to be true and strong and not to betray the flag and themselves: Devata, Kishore. Kanu and his father, all are true patriots "undefeated all, no jail-house could ever break their spirit"\(^2\). The entire country asks in thunderous shouts the alien rulers to quit. In anger and defiance the prisoners chant the new battle cry of "Jai-Hind"—"Victory to India". Intellectuals like Rahoul become vociferous and get themselves arrested.

Indian wives also have immense fortitude when their husbands are imprisoned. They spontaneously rise to the occasion. As self-possessed as men, they are prepared to follow their husbands' way by defying the Britishers. Monju in the novel does the same thing. She says to Rahoul that she soon "shall go"\(^3\) his way. Further she says "I am not the silly thing I used to be. you know that"\(^4\). The novel ends with the inscription of inspired people singing loudly in chorus the following immortal line of Rabindranath Tagore:

"The more their eyes redden with rays, the more
our eyes open; the more they tighten the chains,
the more the chains loosen!"\(^5\).

\(^1\)Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!. p.98
\(^2\)Ibid., p.196
\(^3\)Ibid., p.203
\(^4\)Ibid.
\(^5\)Ibid., p.205
In addition to hunger and freedom, synthesis of opposites is another dominant theme in Bhattacharya's fiction. As a profound scholar of Indian history, he has concentrated upon the great Indian tradition of integration of diverse and conflicting elements, viewpoints and cultures. In this novel, Bhattacharya synthesizes the old and the new through different sets of the characters and episodes. The stories of the Basu family in Calcutta and Kajoli's family in Baruni project his belief that life is all compromise, and there can be unity in diversity.

The Basu family of Calcutta has six members in all. There are four males and two female members. All except one live together under the same roof. The male as well as the female members of the family are, with the exception of Rahoul and Devata, more or less, diametrically opposed to one another yet they live peacefully and happily together. The members of the house represent three different stages of life—Devata representing old age, Samarendra middle age and Rahoul and Kunal youth. In spite of their different attitude and ideas, they do not criticized and detest one another.

The eldest member of this family Devesh Basu, is an earnest Gandhite. He is an idealist and a veteran freedom fighter. Above seventy in age, he lives in a village where people are very dear to him and he thinks them as "the core of his being, his blood and bone". The villagers, too, hold him in high esteem and call him "Devata" out of love and respect. But none except Rahoul in his own family understand the old man. Rahoul's wife, Monju describes him:

"Grandfather. An eccentric. He had odd ideas.

Ever since he retired from his work as a teacher.

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya. So Many Hungers!, p.64
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.\footnote{1}

Though Devata lives a simple and hard life in a village far from the big city of Calcutta, he has never quarrelled with his son, Samarendra, who has a vision and moral different from his own. As a prominent leader of the peasant, he goes to prison several times.

Samarendra Basu is obsessed by a quest for money and profit. He is an economic offender, who has made a lot of money. He has earned more in six months through dishonest means than he can earn as a lawyer in fifty years. He is always busy adding to his wealth by foul means. He hoards rice in order to make money, no matter if thousands of people die of starvation. He has no other interest and no other dream than accumulating riches. The war means to him nothing but an opportunity to increase his wealth:

“\textquoteleft That mind was unshaken as ever, insensitive. It thought of the war only as a rare chance to reap a harvest of gold. Devata to have such a son! The bitter irony.”\footnote{2}

Samarendra is absolutely different from his father as well as his sons, not only in his basic nature, manner, temperament and attitude towards life, but also in his physical appearance and dress. Bhattacharya brings this fact out early in the novel:

“Father was near fifty, thick-set, with shrewd eyes in a broad, heavy-jowled face under

\footnotesize{1.Bhabani Bhattacharya, \textit{So Many Hungers!}, p.17}
\footnotesize{2.Ibid., p.30}
graying, close-cropped hair—a physical type that showed no kinship with his two sons. He wore ill-fitted English clothes.”

Rahoul, Samarendra’s elder son, does not resemble his father. He is a scientist and an idealist who is devoted to his books. His wife Monju tells him that all men are not made alike and that he is not of this earth—he belongs to the stars and unseen lights and they belong to him. If he is akin to any person in the family, it is his grandfather. Unlike his father, he feels for the suffering masses. During the Bengal famine, he runs free kitchen for the destitutes, whereas his father goes on hoarding rice in order to sell it in the black market. Rahoul has a keen desire to plunge into the freedom struggle. His fiery spirit is made evident by his passionate speech to the students:

“With better 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.”

Kunal, Rahoul’s younger brother, is a spirited young man. He does not bother about idealism or nationalistic fervour. He is a realist who takes life as it comes his way, but not a realist in Samarendra’s sense of turn. He prefers an army career. But he is not mean and immoral. He helps a person to solve his food problem by vacating the post he held.

Besides the male members, the female members of the Basu family are Rahoul’s mother and his wife Monju. They also have different temperaments and outlooks in life. Rahoul’s mother is a middle-aged, practical-minded lady

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya. So Many Hungers!. p.9
2. Ibid., p.202
of worldly wisdom. As soon as 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-years supply, before the grocer has an inkling. Prices will touch the sky...sugar too".

Monju, lacks this practical wisdom. She likes to visit hotels and restaurants and loves to dance on ball-room floor. But there is a change of attitude in her at the end of the novel.

This analysis of the four major male characters and two women characters clearly shows that in spite of their being close blood relations, they are more or less opposed to one another with the exception of Rahoul and Devata, who resemble each other in many ways. They exemplify that life is all compromise and they co-exist peacefully. Bhattacharya succeeds remarkably in depicting them as an integrated family. There is a queer amalgam of the old and the young, the idealist and the materialist, and the imperialist and the democrat in the Basu family.

Another group of characters presented in the novel is Kajoli and her family in Baruni. They also exemplify the novelist’s practice of blending the traditional and the modern elements of life. Both “Devata” and Kishore are outsiders belonging to the city of Calcutta. Their ways and attitudes are different from those of the peasant family they live with. Although Devata is highly educated, enlightened and an idealist, having an entirely different family background, yet he establishes such harmonious relationship with Kajoli’s family that it is almost impossible to think of these people without

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers!, p.6
him. He calls Kajoli’s house “My daughter’s household”\(^1\). Even while in
prison, he feels worried about these people who were “truly his own, nearer to
him than his blood kin”\(^2\). Kajoli is not highly educated but still there exists a
harmonious bond between her and the old man. She and her younger brother
Onu, call him “Dadu” affectionately.

Similarly Kishore’s union with Kajoli and their mutual adjustment with
each other testify to Bhattacharya’s idea of merging the traditional and the
modern values. Kishore is a young educated man. He has been a famous
labour leader of a cotton mill at Calcutta. He served five month’s
imprisonment for leading the striking workers of the mill. The peasant’s work
of sowing, growing and reaping paddy is alien to him. Unlike him, Kajoli is a
peasant girl of Baruni. She has never been to a school. She is regarded
by
Devata as a traditional Indian girl “with a legacy of manners as old a India”\(^3\).

There is also an encounter of the old values with the new in the
episode in which a destitute girl bares herself in order to save not only herself,
but also a number of other destitutes from starvation. She is common and
traditional as a girl but modern in her enterprise and with no qualms regarding
her manner of helping the poor hungry people.

The episode where Rahoul addresses Kajoli’s mother as
“Mother” is also symbolic of the synthesis of the traditional and the modern
values in the sense that Rahoul, a sophisticated man of the town, mixes up
with a woman of common origin. Though an educated and city-bred man, he
establishes his kinship with the simple and uneducated village woman. The

\(^1\) Bhabani Bhattacharya. *So Many Hungers!* p.24
\(^2\) Ibid., p.97
\(^3\) Ibid., p.28
following exchange of pleasantries between Rahoul and Kajoli's mother well illustrates the former's values regarding respect for elders:

“Father is well? Mother? She asked out of politeness
“Bau-ma? The little one?” “Yes Mother, they are well”
Mother! The word had slipped his tongue without thought. Happiness came upon him that he had broken out his class sophistication and called a simple peasant woman mother."

Thus Bhattacharya presents a blending of tradition and modernity subtly but impressively. He expresses his belief that there can be true understanding between different classes of society and that the class barrier can be demolished; provided people have genuine concern for one other.

So Many Hungers! as a narrative is also interpreted as an allegory of the conflict between the values of town life symbolized by life in Calcutta and the values of village represented through the life of Baruni. Bhabani Bhattacharya contrasts the two sets of opposing values by juxtaposing the life of Samarendra Basu, an affluent barrister and businessman of Calcutta with the life of the patriotic-peasant of Baruni, whose soul is given to the country. The focus of the novelist alternates between Calcutta and Baruni as he describes the vicissitudes in the life of these two families and along with them of townsfolk and village folk in general.

As the war progresses and hardships of people increase. Calcutta turns into a world of wealthy traders where one witnesses the hateful site of man’s callous greed for money and his shameless disregard of all codes of civilized humanity. While the granaries of the selfish black marketers abound in rice.

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya. So Many Hungers!, p.97
innumerable beings die for want of it. While the restaurants of the rich city buzz with life and music and bulge with food, destitutes in the nearby lanes and pavements die sick, hungry and helpless. The city of Calcutta is thus a veritable inferno with its presiding deities like the greedy Samarendra Basu and Sir Abalabandhu who fatten on the black market and shamelessly gloat over the sad predicament of helpless and innocent destitutes.

Through Rahoul and Monju, the reader comes to know about the ways of young men and women in the cities. They tease one another and the boys wink at girls. Young girls enjoy a great degree of permissiveness and freedom. They dance publicly and wear fashionable dresses, which expose their bodies to make them look provocative. Besides, there is an unbridgeable gulf between man and man created by the notions of social status and snobbery. Speaking of a beautiful young woman, Rahoul tells Monju that she would not care for him because of her high social position: “Positions. Social status. She goes about with high officials; she is swallowed up in her social snobbery”¹. He says that men occupying high positions in the Government are thought to be men of stature. While the rest of the world, including a teacher is regarded as just common.

The village of Baruni presents a completely different picture of life and values. The peasant and the members of his family whom Devata treats as his own children are full of patriotic fervour and are prepared to make any sacrifices for the freedom of the country. Being creatures of the soil, they are gentle and affectionate, and possess the age-old qualities of endurance and patience. The peasants of the village are simple, selfless and hard working. They share each other’s joys and sufferings. Unfortunately, this simple life of

¹. Bhabani Bhattacharya. So Many Hungers!, p.48
the village of Haruni is disrupted by war, famine and the vicious life of the town. The fishing boats of the villagers are seized by the Government for the use of military personnel and the peasants are forced to sell their grain to the agents of the imperialist Government and greedy hoarders. The cruelty of Nature in the form of famine conspires with the cruelty of man and turns villagers into helpless destitutes who are forced to march towards the city of Calcutta to seek food.

But the sordidness and meanness of town life, does not fully fail to subdue the nobility of spirit of the village folk. There are instances where destitutes share with each other their joys and satisfaction and sympathize with one another. A famished boy who fought against a dog to procure a jam tin, holds it out to share with a youngster who looks with wistful eyes towards him.

Thus the novel shows the victory of human values over the sordid and vicious ways of life. So Many Hungers! also brings out the differences between the rich and the poor, the prosperous and the deprived. The wealthy are possessed with lot of wealth and greed and they go on increasing their wealth at the cost of the poor. They befool them for their gain with clever tricks and lies. Kanu, a young peasant living under the guidance of Dadu, states the truth when he says to a fisherman:

"Greed, the big greed in the belly. They are out to get rich, more rich. And how may they get rich, more rich, if they do not grab and make other folk poor, more poor?"  

Bhattacharya feels that in this age of developing technology and super fast
communication, there is little understanding between man and man. On the one hand there are some strong persons exploiting weaker sections, but on the other hand, there are some generous persons also. The novelist believes that conflict is mostly confined to the rulers and politicians. He praises the common British people in the novel. "They are good people. The people are good everywhere". He suggests that people everywhere are bound together by certain common bonds which know no national boundaries.

The novel reveals Bhattacharya's determination to grasp and portray in the most realistic manner the intensity of the suffering of innocent men, women and children of Bengal, due to the scarcity of food. It was his sense of social realism which made him react with particular moral vigour and indignation to the Great Famine of Bengal. This novel shows that he does not only deal with surface or superficial realism, but he probes deeper in order to bring out the inner meaning and significance of a particular dramatic situation. The dramatic situation in the novel is that of a kind of conflict between the so-called exploiters and the exploited. Amongst the exploiters are Samarendra Basu, Sir Abalabandhu and the British and the pimps. The exploited are represented mainly by Kajoli.

In the course of the novel, Bhattacharya tries to give us a peep into the lives of soldiers. The soldier who rapes Kajoli and then takes her to the hospital is sympathetically portrayed by the novelist. The soldiers during the British rule and war were not allowed to go home for long periods and thus suffered from a sense of nostalgia. The soldier who rapes Kajoli had been away from his wife and children for one year. In Kajoli, he perhaps saw his wife and thus could not restrain himself from indulging in the sexual act.

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, *So Many Hungers!*, p.21
Besides portraying the topical sights and the situation of the Bengal Famine, the novel is also the universal story of the simple girl Kajoli, who yearns for the basic pleasures of married life. She with her husband Kishore would be content with misery, but Kishore is compelled to leave her home and hearth in quest of food and a job. In his absence she suffers a lot. But does not give up hope. She still believes that her husband would come one day. This elemental urge of a life partner is depicted by Bhattacharya in every novel. Man desires a constant companion to share his joys and sorrows.

The problem of adjustment in married life is a recurrent motive in modern fiction because the woman is no longer a submissive and humble creature of a lower status in the family but one having equal rights and responsibilities. When Kajoli’s father and elder brother imprisoned for participating in the freedom struggle, she takes upon herself the responsibility of looking after her younger brother and old brother.

Bhattacharya has depicted the impact of the changing times on all sections of society as well as his vision of a bright future. In this respect his art is a valuable ally in transforming society. He wants to change the conditions of the down-trodden by making them assertive and at the same time wants to change the heart of the exploiters by making them merciful, so that both the sections are educated in the right direction. Bhattacharya in his capacity as a novelist, makes an attempt to bring about the desired change in the social attitude. He has incorporated in his fiction some of those very social evils which need to be over come and destroyed.

So Bhattacharya with the physician’s eye, examines the society, only to find the canker of exploitation eating away its vital parts. He shows in the novel the values of rural society constantly being corroded by the acid-touch of urban realities. Khwaja Ahmed Abbas’ remarks about Bhattacharya’s
So Many Hungers! and He Who Rides a Tiger referring to them as “two of the most significant novels written by the Indians in the English language, and among the aptest illustrations of social realism”¹, is very pertinent here. From So Many Hungers! it seems Bhabani Bhattacharya believes with Hardy that “a novel is an impression not an argument”² and the impression he leaves on the reader of the human sufferings during the Bengal Famine are indelible. Adding to the achievements of the novel is the fact that it has retained an extraordinary freshness and immediacy that time has not jaded.

2. Thomas Hardy, ‘Study’. Phoenix, p.398
Music for Mohini
Bhabani Bhattacharya

"A splendid novel that may take rank with Pearl Buck's 'The Good Earth'" Chicago Tribune