Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *He Who Rides a Tiger* gives us a pathetic picture of the innumerable indignities to which human beings were subjected during the Bengal famine of 1943. The famine, like the vengeful gods, which Hardy cursed, pulled mankind down to a despicable level, never suffering them to seek redemption; honour was at its lowest ebb, almost irretrievably lost. The mass exodus from the villages to the cities and the concomitant dislocations in life brought into relief various kinds of perversities that were, perhaps, inconceivable earlier. The human essence was exploited to the core and all that remained subsequently was a fraternity of debased mortal frames. Everything was reduced to mere bestiality and the law of the brute world prevailed. Bhattacharya, dealing with an event, which marks absolute depravity—individual, social and moral—on the part of man, gears every possible artistic device to ensuring the reader’s reaction to and protest against the inhuman conditions that prevailed during the times depicted.

*He Who Rides a Tiger* is Bhabani Bhattacharya’s third novel, which was published in New York in 1954. The novel presents a true picture of pre-Independence Indian society. It also depicts life in Bengal during World War II. This specific period referred to is the year 1942-43, which was marked by severe famine and by the momentum picked up by the Quit India Movement. This was the year when the people of India suffered unprecedented hunger. The novelist in this work is concerned with the exploitation of the lower caste, which takes place at the economic and the social level. People grudge to feed the destitutes, but fill the bowls of the sadhus in saffron loincloth; they callously ignore the cries of the children dying of hunger.
Bhattacharya also views life in rural India and writes about the exodus of the villagers to urban areas at the time of the famine when insecurity prevails and the city is believed to be a panacea for all their ills.

The novel deals with the changing fortunes of Kalo, a blacksmith, who is driven to the city by the famine. He is sent to jail for stealing a bunch of bananas following which he becomes a corpse remover and a pimp to make both ends meet, finds his daughter Chandralekha in a prostitute’s house, then resorts to deception to wreak vengeance on the high caste people by arranging Shiva’s “coming” from the ground with the help of two seers of gram. The novel also castigates the traditional and religious minded people and their hypocritical ideas and ways of life in a persistent and forceful manner.

This novel sounds quite powerfully the basic theme of Bhabani Bhattacharya’s creative work—the exposure of “evil forces”, that is, of colonialism. The writer wrathfully brands the English Government as the culprit of the tragedy, and calls it a “cold and inhuman colossus of authority”. The Indian bourgeoisie that helps the “evil forces” to gain profits out of the deplorable condition of the peasants is described. This novel deals with the hunger for freedom, hunger for money and hunger for sex.

It is interesting to note that Bhattacharya went back to the material of his first brilliant novel, So Many Hungers!, for the exploration of the problem of caste discrimination which he took in his second novel Music for Mohini. He Who Rides a Tiger deals with the same theme as So Many Hungers! The only difference is that in the former work the novelist explores the problem of caste in terms of its outmodedness and its ludicrousness in a modern society and the narration is of a comic – satiric level whereas So Many Hungers! has

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers! p.94
the tragic-poetic level where human miseries and sufferings are silent.

_He Who Rides a Tiger_ is a protest against a moral fable of human depravity and degradation. It is an artistic paradigm of the inexhaustible spiritual resources of man to help him get out of the moral morass of deceit and falsehood. It is at once a pointer and reminder: a pointer to the fact of man’s all too imperfect systems of social organization based on fear and a reminder of the redemptive possibilities of truth and courage.

This work portrays the familiar historical event of the Bengal famine of 1943. The famine, though a natural calamity that affects the lives of thousands, is, in the novel, a gruesome backdrop against which the human drama is exacted. The novel gives us a pathetic picture of the innumerable indignities and cruelties to which human beings were subjected during the famine. In the story the famine strikes the town called Jharna and causes the starvation of inhabitants. Kalo, the hero, leaves for the city and finds, on the way, a whole flood of moving skeletons in quest for food. To fulfill his hunger, he steals a bunch of bananas for which he is imprisoned for three months. Other scenes which depict hunger are equally miserable. It appears, as if the novel has arisen from the heart of the novelist bleeding over the miserable plight of the poor people. The tale with a common worker (a blacksmith) as the protagonist caught the imagination of the communist countries; and the novel came out in Russian (1955), Polish (1955), Serbo-Croatian (1957), German (1958), Finnish (1957), Slovak (1958), Chinese (1958) and Hungarian (1964).

_He Who Rides a Tiger_ is in a way a picaresque novel, depicting the “adventures” of Kalo, a blacksmith, on his way to Calcutta. A picaresque novel has a tendency towards looseness of structure, since it generally consists of a series of comic and farcical adventures. The protagonist of such a novel is “a rogue”, “given to practical jokes”, an enemy of society in that he is “always
exposing hypocrisies and pretensions”. This description of the picaresque novel fits *He Who Rides a Tiger* in which Kalo’s adventures in Calcutta involve a practical joke, which helps to expose social hypocrisies and religious pretensions of the Hindu society. Kalo’s practical joke, which is central to the novel, consists in changing his Shudra identity and taking on the role of a Brahmin. But the plot of this novel is not as formless as in a picaresque novel like, Smollett’s *Roderick Random* and others, the reason being that the novelist’s central preoccupation with caste and superstition in the Hindu society is the prime concern of the work.

Kalo, the hero of the novel is a poor, hard working blacksmith, whose wife dies in childbirth. He nurses his only daughter and gives her a Brahmin name, Chandralekha. Kalo is very fond of his daughter and he sends her to St. Joseph’s Convent School and along with her he, too, studies her books. Chandralekha, though mocked by her class-mates as a “Kamar’s” daughter, always stands first in the class and when she is in her final year she wins the Ashoka Memorial medal for writing the best essay in an Essay Competition open to the students all over Bengal. Kalo is proud of his daughter’s achievement, because the news is printed in “The Hindustan” for everyone to see. He expects the great men of the town to visit his house and pay compliments to the girl, but none comes to congratulate the Kamar’s daughter, “It was as though nothing had happened to Jharna town”. The dark year started three or four months after Chandralekha won her silver medal. It was the year 1943—the darkest year in the history of Bengal—the year of the

Bengal famine, with the Japanese army poised at the eastern front. A plague comes taking the land in its grip, the plague of hunger in the wake of war. Jharna is now a ghost of a town with people dying like flies and the survivors fleeing away from the countryside, Kalo keeps Chandralekha with his aunts and decides to go to Calcutta in search of work and food. On his way, travelling on the footboard of the crowded train, he steals a few bananas from a First Class compartment and is caught by a policeman. For this offence, he gets three months of hard labour in a jail in some distant town. This incident hardens his mind against society. "Something was gone and Kalo, blacksmith of Jharna town, could never be whole again". A fellow convict says:

"There is one road for us—for me, for you, for all of us". "What road? Kalo turned his face with quick interest". "We are the scum of the earth. The boss people scorn us because they fear us. They hit us where it hurts badly in the pit of belly. We've got to hit back."

This fellow convict is B-10, who tells him that Calcutta has become "a hell house on earth" and one has to do some work even that of a pimp, to make a living. He gives Kalo the address of his friend, Rajani, the bangle-seller and asks him to go and see him, after he is released from the jail. B-10 also tells Kalo how to make money by acting the role of a Sadhu, a Brahmin, and by selling "spirit food". Then the day comes when Kalo is released from jail. He goes to Calcutta where first he makes money as a corpse carrier. He writes his first letter to his daughter after three months and then goes to Rajani, a man.

1.Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.32
2.Ibid., P-37
about whom B-10 had told him in jail. Rajani asks him to wear a Gandhi-
cap and start work as a procurer. In the mean time, Chandralekha is befooled
by a woman who tells her a lie that her father is injured in an accident in
Calcutta and is recovering in the hospital. Thus the woman takes her to
Calcutta—to a brothel. There Lekha suffers for four or five days. But at the last
moment her father comes in time and heroically rescues her from the doom. It
is after this incident that he decides to hit back at society. “They hit us where it
hurts badly. We’ve got to hit back. We’ve got to hit back”¹, says he. At this
point the plot takes a new turn. Now Kalo is no more a blacksmith. He
disguises himself as Brahmin Sadhu chanting “Namo Shivaya” and waits for
the coming of Shiva under a banyan tree on the outskirts of the city. His trick
succeeds, “Shiva” appears from beneath the earth, people in a frenzy donate
lots of money, gold and whatever they can afford; construction of a temple
starts and many people like Motichand donate generously for the temple.
Motichand a rich stockbroker himself gets the temple completed in a short time
and makes money on the basis of Sadhvi Lekha’s words
“Buy...Sell...buy...sell”. Kalo now acting as Mangal Adhikari, the pujari of
the city. Even the magistrate, who, with his own pen, penalized Kalo with the
three- month hard labour term in prison touches his feet. Days pass by while
Kalo very happily plays the role of Mangal Adhikari, the pujari of the temple.
But Lekha seems to be unhappy and sad, for she does not know the time when
this lie will end, she says : “Where will this end?...the lies press heavy on my
heart”². The situation is again changed. A destitute who is a blacksmith, by
name, Vishwanath, comes to the mercy of Mangal Adhikari. He pleads with

¹.Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.77
².Ibid., p.94
the pujari to give him a few morsels of food for he has been hungry for two days. He tries to touch the Brahmin’s forearm but the latter steps back quickly in fury. At first Kalo experiences a feeling of hatred for the destitute. But Lekha protests against this and the destitute is kept as a gardener in the temple’s garden. From time to time Kalo realizes within himself that before the crisis, he was like Vishwanath, following the established forms, without ever questioning them. But it was hunger, famine and the brutality of the upper classes and of course, his own simplicity, due to which he was sent to prison that forced him to rebel against such a society. B-10 also narrates his own story of suffering and reveals that he is actually a Brahmin, Bikash Mukherji. He relates the tragedy of his sister, who was forced by her own parents to marry an elderly widower, this becoming the cause of her committing suicide by drowning. He also tells them how in fury he tore off his sacred thread, left home and went to Calcutta to be a mechanic in a car factory.

After the release of Biten, there arises a confrontational situation between father and daughter. Lekha is now tired of lies and of being in “a gilded cage” and complains that Kalo does not want to relinquish his newly earned power, and money. Kalo dreams of getting her married to a Brahmin. But it seems to Kalo that Lekha is more interested in Biten, so he speaks to Biten about it. This leads to two extremely serious situations, one involving Kalo and Biten and the other between Biten and Lekha. The novel now moves towards the tragic end, lending an unexpected psychological complexity to the characters. Biten wants Kalo to face reality and not to live in a world of illusions, because Kalo, now a rich Brahmin, wants Lekha to marry a Brahmin who would give her full security and happiness. Kalo offers Lekha to Biten and urges him to take her to the temple. But he declines. Later in the novel Biten comes to their house. He wants to know from Lekha the exact truth about the
suffering that she went through in Calcutta, but she refuses to divulge anything. Since Biten, hurt by her silence, leaves the city, without even bidding them farewell, Lekha turns her mind to religion and ritual as a solace, and participates everyday in the ‘arati’ with complete involvement and devotion. Chandralekha soon gets transformed, both by the media and by the discovery of a hoary-headed mendicant, into the “Mother of Seven fold Bliss”. And behind all this is Motichand, who wants to serve his own purpose. He craftily sends a message to Mangal Adhikari that he would like to marry Lekha who would be his fifth wife. He assures Kalo of economic security for her and a three-storied mansion in Barrackpore. This astonishes Kalo and he is indignant at this proposal. He replies saying “She is not good enough for the great man”.

Lekha who is now considered almost a goddess, enjoys the role and the glory it brings as “another escape, compensation for her past defeat” But the role has its tensions and tasks. She must perform miracles and heal people, but this she fails to do. She fails to heal the dying child and earns the curses of the mother of the dead child: “she was astride the tiger’s back with her father but she could not ride with determined ease. Her problem was more acute than his, the enchanted moment all too brief. Her tension mounted”. The novel reaches its climax—the grand “Yagna” ceremony at which Lekha’s installation was to takes place in the presence of rich people like Motichand and Sir Abalabandhu. Mangal Adhikari is given a chance to speak. He makes a dramatic speech:

“The holy words have been taboo to folks of

1.Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.219
2.Ibid., p.220
3.Ibid., p.221
my caste for thousands and thousands of years...
And I, who stand before you, I who made Shiva’s abode…” His tone was low but aggressive. “I who made this temple was not a Brahmin”.

At first the audience thinks that he is joking. But again after some time Kalo resumes his speech. He is aware of the consequences, so he thinks that to save himself from the tiger, he has to kill it:

“He was riding a tiger and could not dismount. He had sat astraddle, half-resigned but helpless, while the beast prowled or raced at will. Yet even as he rode, he had been aware all the time that there was no way but to kill the tiger”.

Kalo makes a confession telling the audience the truth about himself. He then continues the comment:

“So you know at last. I am a kamar from afar. Hunger drove me from my native earth. Hunger took me to the jail. From there I walked into hell itself. I saw the face of Evil. I asked myself a question, I who had been content with my lot, my humble place of life. I puzzled over all that had happened to me until the answer came: Nothing is as true as falseness! The more false you are, to yourself and to others, the more true you become!

The rest of the answer is, Evil is to be faced and

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.237
2. Ibid., p.237-38
After listening to his story, the audience shouts with anger: “The rogue! The Shaitan! Beat him up. Break every bone in his Carcass”\(^1\). A stone strikes his chest and Lekha throws her arms round him, shielding him. Curses are heaped upon them. But support comes from a section of the crowd—the sweepers, the rickshaw runners, the coolies and other people of his own caste—who see the truth in Kalo’s words. He is happy to see Biten and Vishwanath among those who are shouting, “Victory to our brother”! Biten hails Kalo as a hero of the legend of freedom and Kalo says, “No, Bikash Mukherji, the conquest is yours”\(^2\). Chandralekha is so happy that she jerks the pearl necklace off her throat and flings it at Motichand, who asks for it frantically. The novel ends with the line “Kalo alone with his daughter, passed out of the gateway of the temple”\(^3\).

The novel has a strange mixture of comedy, satire, melodrama and tragedy. Prof. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar, comments that in this novel “Satire and entertainment are mixed in equal proportions”\(^4\). The response from abroad has been as always, “enthusiastic”, as Dorothy Blair Shimer points out. She herself considers it his ‘masterpiece’ admitting though to “some bias, perhaps”\(^5\). She also quotes from “The New York Times”—“He Who Rides a Tiger is a skilful and entertaining story and an illuminating glimpse inside one corner of India.

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1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, p.239
2. Ibid., p.241
3. Ibid., p.245
4. Ibid.
6. Dorothy Blair Shimer, Bhabani Bhattacharya, p.53
But it is more than that. Its indignation is worn and generous, its material is fresh, its writing blessed with vigour and charm”. According to “The Sunday Times”, “The book crystallizes with compassion and understanding the heart and tragedy of India”.

The Indo-English novel has always been instrumental both in an artistic rendering of the contemporary, social reality and in reflecting the changing national tradition as a complex of inherited values and acquired habits of attitude, taste and temperament. Since the thirties, the Indo-English novel has not only established itself in the native ground but has also been the spearhead of progressive ideas and experiments in the novel as a medium of artistic communication. By now, it has also acquired a status of meaningful independent existence in the complex body of Indian national literature. As a product of historical events, the Indian novel in English has been both a reflector and harbinger of change as well as the essence of our national cultural tradition.

Social awareness in its amplitude of facts as well as its deep location of sensibility has been for long the focus of the plot of the Indian English novel. The fiction of writers from Mulk Raj Anand downward all of whom are realists and naturalists has a raw, unshaped, yet a heady power about it. Its force is straight, direct and disturbing. To this group of writers must be traced the central identity of Bhabani Bhattacharya’s novels.

Bhattacharya tells the story in his own inimitable style, combining irony and innuendo and dry wit and wry humour. The opening paragraph illustrates the point and poses subtly the problem of the novel:

1. Dorothy Blair Shimer, Bhabani Bhattacharya, p.54
2. Ibid.
"Fond parents often name their timid shrimp of a boy Warrior King or Brave in Battle Hefty, pitch-dark girls go through life with the label lighting streak or Lotus wreath. But Kalo, Black, was true to his complexion, which had the colour quality of ink, and people said that when he sweated, you could collect the oozing fluid for your inkwell. Kalo parried this friendly jibe with his usual good humour."

Metaphorically, the problem is one of identity; and, ironically, the problem of the identity of Kalo, the village blacksmith, is not physical but social, and the solution he finally finds to resolve his personal as well as cultural crisis is moral. Kalo’s “usual good humour” notwithstanding resolutions to the problem are difficult to arrive at. The irony of calling a “Timid, shrimp of a boy Warrior King or Brave in Battle” becomes obvious to us only later when we come to know of Kalo’s deliberate decision “to become a Brahmin” in order to take revenge upon society. Although Kalo’s personal troubles start after the death of his wife, his unconscious yearning for a change in status, albeit in name only, finds expression in his naming his daughter Chandralekha, as advised by a Brahmin:

"Why, if it is a boy, call him Obhijit, girl call her Chandralekha. We gentle folks give that kind of name to our sons and daughters. Dark-minded folks of your caste have a fancy for Ḫaba and Goba, Punti and Munni.”

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.1
2. Ibid., p.2
Then, after some time Kalo is sentenced to three months’ imprisonment with “hard labour” for a petty offence. Kalo’s habitual confidence in the established law gets irrevocably eroded when the magistrate adds insult to injury by questioning him in “a cold and impassive” way: “Why did you have to live?” or why did his daughter have to live?

Bhattacharya exhibits at this point a vivid and dramatic development in the delineation of Kale’s character in that he emerges from the incident of his petty theft of food for survival and the humanly degrading and devalued justices meted out to him at the magistrate’s court, as a wholly alive individual, awakened to the presence of injustice and evil all around. As Ihab Hassan says:

“The disparity between the innocence of the hero and the destructive character of his experience defines his concrete, existential, situations”.

Thus Kalo’s existential encounter with the conventional system of values—social as well legal—makes him recoil from the reality of inhumanity. According to the narrative, “Something was gone and Kalo, the blacksmith of Jharna town, could never be whole again”.

Kalo’s haphazard education becomes complete and acquires a theoretical orientation in the company of B-10, a much more experienced political prisoner in the jail, fifty miles off Calcutta. B-10 tells him of the only choice left to them. “We are the scum of the earth. The boss people scorn us

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, p.31
because they fear us. They hit us where it hurts badly in the pit of the belly. We've got to hit back. The novel can be analytically divided into two parts: The first seven chapters constitute the phase of Kalo's innocence and elementary education in the school of life. His existential dilemma with all its moral implications and the final denouement constitute the second part, comprising twenty chapters. Thus Bhattacharya's narrative scheme brings the thematic substratum of the novel into a sharp focus. His universe of discourse includes not only the cultural contradictions of the Indian social environment but also the existential complexities that everyman encounters in his quest for fulfilment. Since life is all inclusive while art is necessarily exclusive, Bhattacharya once again selects the time of famine in Bengal in 1943 because of its artistic possibilities in depicting characters. Thus Kalo, for example, progresses from the stage of what Ihab Hassan called "radical innocence" at Jharna to one of the knowledge of the outer reality through various experiences in Calcutta but finally "regresses", ironically into the wisdom of self-awareness. In other words, Kalo fulfils himself by simply being himself. He did not need to become someone else. He seems to realize eventually that 'civilization' itself is a mask that can only suffocate the wearer for it does not allow one to play his true role in a traditional society. His identity as a craftsman need not be sloughed off in the false hope of achieving dubious success as a priest. Success of every kind is futile if it does not lead to happiness and knowledge, is irrelevant if it does not result in wisdom and inner peace. Greatness that is thrust upon one owing to the mask one wears, leads only to personal misery, for the public image of an individual should

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.37
correspond with one's own private self. Any dichotomy between the idea and the image not only result in the inevitable destruction of the image but also falsifies the idea itself. It is these reflections that Kalo disguised as Mangal Adhikari is conscious and wary of in the latter part of the novel.

Kalo’s education is not at all complete although he desperately clings to the suggestion of B-10 regarding his becoming a Brahmin by wearing the “scared thread”. The miracle of the “coming” of Shiva, of course, enables him to become a Brahmin, and it helps him mount the tiger for the first time in his life. From now onwards the title of the novel begins to become significant to the reader in the context of the great adventure of Kalo, the village blacksmith, under the mask of Mangal Adhikari the city dwelling Brahmin.

The novel can be studied on multiple levels of understanding as an ordered and artistic structure of an individual experience in a specified set of circumstances, as a legend or a moral fable of freedom from fear, of hunger for power and glory; as a saga of naturalistic projection of national consciousness in the Forties, as a romantic story of the growth and development of individual consciousness and finally, as an example of aesthetic pleasure in the form of the novel. As K.R.S.Iyengar observes:

“The tempo of life in Calcutta, the complex of urban vices and urban sophistication, the pressure of mass movement and mass hysteria, the reign of superstition and mumbo-jumbo—gives the novel an eerie and piquant quality all its own”\(^{1}\).

\(^{1}\)K.R.S.Iyengar : op.cit., p.327
As for the theme of the novel, Prema Nandakumar defines it in his own words: "The theme of He Who Rides a Tiger is public and individual morality". Bhattacharya's success in this novel is not merely due to its theme, which is doubtless very interesting but also because his vision is moral, and his technique seems to be more subtle than that he employs in So Many Hunger's! It reminds one of Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve and R.K.Narayan's The Guide—the former in its treatment of the themes of hunger, rural versus urban environment and Adamic innocence and satanic experiences of an individual, the latter in the characterization of the protagonists as well as the fraudulence conceived in the precincts of a temple. It is the "rainbow of living relationships", as D.H.Lawrence would put it, that Bhattacharya so adroitly reflects through the prism of Kalo's consciousness and makes this novel not only culturally significant but also intensely moral. The "business of art" believes Lawrence "is to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe at the living moment".

Along with the Bengal Famine and the period of the Quit India Movement as its background this novel also explores and develops Bhattacharya's basic attitude towards life. Early in the novel, the novelist sheds light on the lofty, unbending ideals of the people of the working classes. The ravenous hunger fails to subdue the poor and makes them take to vicious ways. The wicked traders come to Kalo's village to purchase young girls at high rates for the harlot houses in Calcutta, but the starving, self-respecting—

men like Kalo and other spit on their faces. The former in return comment, "The low born people won't bend but they will crack. God has sent his mighty hunger to teach the low born people a true lesson"\textsuperscript{1}.

The writer raises the following questions: "Why should not a woman preserve life even at the cost of selling her body? and must she die, rather than sell herself? His men and women have a simple set of values with faith in the law, that instrument which served out justice even to the poor"\textsuperscript{2}. Even in the most desperate state of hunger, they do not commit suicide, because they believe in preservation of life in a dignified manner, rather than in its annihilation:

"For days and months they had prayed hard to all the gods in temple and in haven. The gods will not listen. They would not even bless the slowly dying with death's quick thunder bolt. Kill yourself and be relieved? That would be sinful. You could not take a life not even your own"\textsuperscript{3}.

The helpless, hungry people cling to life, flinging away all that is dead and dross in them. That is why when the gate of the prison opens for Kalo, he is not at all depressed and broken-hearted. He is replete with vigour and freshness, "Kalo felt queer. A new warmth, the power of life itself replaced the chill of dread he had been feeling. He was no longer a number in jail. The deadening yoke was off his shoulder"\textsuperscript{4}.

\textsuperscript{1} Bhabani Bhattacharya, \textit{He Who Rides a Tiger}, p.16
\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., p.30
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., p.23
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., p.44
In this novel, the writer also brings out the tenacity of purpose in man. Kalo has not only a purpose in life, but also the power to achieve it. His daughter, Chandralekha, has blind faith in his capacity to attain his goal. Though she does not hear anything from him for a long time, even then, her faith in him does not waver. So when his letter and two crumpled rupee notes reach her after a long gap of time, she is not at all surprised:

“She knew his strength of purpose, the metallic stuff at the core of his being, how could she have lost faith in him even for one eye-flicker?”

Chandralekha also has the fresh confidence in herself to fight her own battle successfully. She believes that her father is not the only person who can fight heroically but she, too, can attain the power of standing on her own legs. She feels that struggle is the only means to live a happy and virtuous life. “The way of struggle”, she says to herself “is the true way. The struggle, first of all against fear”. When Biten, goes away from her after her shocking behaviour with him, she not only pines for him, but also wishes “May he find what he seeks in life. May he be a true fighter”. She and her father fight not against the corrupt and wicked but against the whole society that makes them so. While striving hard to live a respectable life, Bhattacharya’s people wisely think that in life “sometimes a big compromise has to be made”. They usually succeed in compensating for their past defeats and lose their confidence at any stage of their life. When towards the end of the novel Lekha and Kalo are put to great

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.59
2. Ibid., p.162
3. Ibid., p.230
4. Ibid., p.191
stress because of the millionaire, Motichand's strong desire to marry her at any cost, she does not consider committing suicide, she sees only that life which is before her:

"In spite of it Lekha would not accept defeat. She steeled herself in her decision. Life stood before her—not death. There was a new strength in her, a new awareness, with which to face challenge of an unknown future."

At the end of the novel, the writer points out that even the lower-class people rise high and deride the society, which hates and insults them. Kalo and Chandralekha do so, even though they have to take risks as terrible as riding a tiger. They hit hard the powerful upper-class people at whose hands they have suffered immensely.

The book is an exposition of the humble craftsman's confidence and pride in his skill. Kalo tells the destitute, Vishwanath, a blacksmith, who chances to meet him in a very miserable condition, that an honest and competent craftsman is as good and dignified, as the best of folks: "He can hold his head high because the skill of his hands, his special knowledge." So it can be said that Kalo's life story is an expression of Bhabani Bhattacharya's conviction in a positive, bright view of life. This low-caste blacksmith upsets the old social order by investing himself with Brahminhood and rising to the top. He does not undermine society, but becomes a part of it and uses its power by accepting its rules and by fully comprehending its purpose. He has the power to save his daughter in the hour of need, when she decides to accept

2. Ibid., p.113
Motichand’s proposal to become his fifth wife. He, along with his daughter, comes out of the snobbish life to a true life by proclaiming boldly to the world that he is a mere swindler, not a sacred Brahmin and a true devotee of Shiva, the great God. The novelist describes his triumph over society: “They had come back in time to hear him, to see him drive his steel deep into the tiger. This scum of the earth had hit back, hit back where it hurt”¹. His brave confession is welcomed by the common folks who again and again repeated in a loud voice, the slogan “Victory to our brother”. At this moment Chandralekha is seen brimming over with high spirits and happiness. She has an overwhelming realization of an eternal sort of victory. “Baba, after this, what ever happen to us, wherever we go, we can never again be unhappy or defeated”². The moments of great triumph and joy in the life of Kalo and Chandralekha also become an integral part of the life of Biten, who is also sent there. In a low impassioned murmur, he ejaculates:

“You have triumphed over those others and over yourself. What you have done just now will steel the spirit of hundreds and thousands of us. Your story will be legend to inspire and awaken”³.

Bhabani Bhattacharya like other great writers is also obsessed with certain themes, which are derived from personal and compelling experience. The theme of hunger is one such among many others that he has given artistic treatment to in his novels. This theme took its origin from the Bengal famine, which seized the writer’s mind and hunger in one form or the other has

¹.Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.243
².Ibid., p.244
³.Ibid., p.244-45
haunted him throughout his literary career. The novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, also dwells upon the Bengal famine, though it does not treat it with the depth and concentration with which *So Many Hungers!* does. The novel focuses on the darkest period in the history of Bengal. "A plague took the land in its grip, the plague of hunger, in the wake of war – 1943". The profiteers—big capitalists are behind the artificial famine. Along with these rich people the government also seems to be dumb. The government officials do not bother to resort to the rationing of food grains, controlling of prices and checking the activities of money-makers. The farmers are forced to sell off their grain. The entire grain is hidden away and the result is that the markets are empty and the tillers of the soil are reduced to starvation. Food grains in the market are sold at the highest price. The most pathetic part of the event of the famine is that the peasants, for a single morsel, have to sell their land and then buy back the produce of their own land. Other people, too, face the same plight. Weavers have to sell their looms, artisans dispose of their tools and fishermen give away their boats in the form of firewood. Traders and their agents roam about in the village to cheat the innocent people by just giving a small rice bag and a small amount of cash in exchange for their possessions. The village people have no work to do. They, in huge numbers, go to the city in search of jobs but are disappointed:

"The plague washed up in the fierce tides. Bengal was dying. Jharna was dying….people were flying from the hungry town. Many were going to the capital city to seek a living. The people had exchanged their pots and pans, furniture and trinkets for..."

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1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, p.15
Kalo sees the grievous spectacle with panic and helplessness. Driven by hunger and despair, he leaves the village for the city, leaving his dear daughter Chandralekha, to seek employment, so that she may never “have to fear hunger”\(^1\). Ironically, it is during this period of his life that he is famous for eating gluttonously and is proud of his appetite. He would eat more than fifty mangoes and would empty a big bowl of curds at a time. But now times have changed and he has to live without food for a whole day. While going to Calcutta Kalo sees mobs of people moving away and emptying their village to seek fortunes in the big city. But so many of them do not even reach their destination, they die on the way. He also sees a large number of destitute dead bodies lying beside the railway line. When a blow catches his bundle of food and the cloth tears open scattering the rice balls in the dust, he observes painfully: “Ravenous men and women with whoops of joy fell on his food, and in a minute not a grain was left”\(^3\). He himself feels unbearably hungry. He has never before experienced such a hunger, which fills his head with acute dizziness. When in the state of hopelessness and misery, he sees the banana on a table with the owner sleeping, he cannot restrain himself from stealing the fruit:

> “His eyes are trapped by the fruit. It gave him an unbearable ache. He could not look away, his hunger seemed to grow a hundred fold. He

\(^1\)Bhabani Bhattacharya, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, p.15
\(^2\)Ibid., p.21
\(^3\)Ibid., p.26
could no longer stand on the footboard, he had to sit or lie down. Lie down, indeed! But he kept his eyes on the bananas, torturing himself

Hunger not only alienates him from his family, profession and native place, but also sends him to jail for stealing fruit at a time when hordes of hunger-stricken folks are moving about throughout Bengal in search of work and food. He is sent to prison as a common thief by a magistrate who himself had never experienced the agony of hunger. To add to his misery, his daughter also famished for want of food, is betrayed by a woman and is unfortunately brought to a harlot house, from where generally there is no chance of escape.

Not only Kalo, but Biten whose actual name is Bikash Mukherji, is also sentenced to a year’s rigorous imprisonment for instigating hungry men to loot a food shop to cool down their raging hunger. It is, indeed, tragic that the peasants have mortgaged their paddy crops months before they are grown, and that they starve while their fields bear the harvest, which they cannot touch. Such scenes of hunger are witnessed throughout the novel. In the corners of roads, on the heaps of garbage, everyone can see the hungry destitute searching and struggling to get even a single morsel, which might appease their hunger to some extent. Dying people crave for just a sip of rice water. Their hunger has taken the form of utter desperation and they have nothing to see or think about except the spectre of hunger. Hundreds of boys and girls are able to have their first meal after months of starvation. The tide of hunger has brought a number of women and girls to the city and subsequently, unfortunately, to the brothel. The scenario is one of hunger all around!

The novel, on the other hand, also portrays the way of life of the wealthy people. They lavishly spend money and are completely indifferent to the millions of hungry people who are dying due to starvation. The rich seem to be unmoved by the condition of the destitute. To some extent it is these rich people who are responsible for their suffering and miseries. For their prosperity and happiness, they gladly offer a lot of milk to the temples and the Ganges, but they are not prepared to help suffering humanity in any manner. When Vishwanath and Kalo give some of the bath milk of the temple to the starving children, rich people, who offer bath milk object to it in the strongest possible terms. When they are told that mother Ganga will be insulted if milk were poured into her waters, while children lie on her banks dying slowly of hunger, one rich man who is a dealer in gold remarks: “What absurd talk! Tens of thousands have died of hunger. What difference would a few more or a few less make. The issue at stake is bigger than those useless lives”\(^1\). In fact, these well-to-do people are not at all moved by the tragedy of the destitutes dying like rats in a plague. They are absolutely unaffected by the procession of the hungry men crying out, “We demand food for the hungry”, “Food for all”, “Work for all”, “Jail for the rice profiteers”\(^2\). Although it is not a crime to demand food for the hungry yet in the sight of law and court, it is a crime and any person insisting on this is punished. There is appeasement of the hunger of the people for over ten months at a stretch, though thunderous demonstrations by hungry marchers led by Biten, Vishwanath and others are seen in the streets almost every day. Inspite of the cruel beating up by the police and arrests on a large scale, these demonstrations continue. But it seems that there

\(^1\) Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.134
\(^2\) Ibid., p.160-61
is no end to the miseries of the destitute. An increasing number of heart-rending, hunger scenes are witnessed everyday by everyone. But not a single maker of law or possessor of wealth dares to come and help them. There is a description of pathetic tale of Obhijit, a destitute child whose mother is taken away by squads and is finally looked after by Chandralekha and afterwards adopted by her and her father. Lekha’s first meeting with this hungry child is described in the novel thus:

"The boy had found a half-eaten mango rotting in its yellow skin. He saw Lekha coming towards him and stiffened. He put the fruit back in the garbage and waited staring. His mouth opened but no voice came. He could not even whimper or beg for mercy."

It is a matter of great surprise for Lekha to see how this little boy has been overlooked when the destitute people are removed from the city.

The unwholesome and pernicious consequences of hunger are truthfully and graphically described by Kalo who suffers from them the most in the entire story. Hunger not only separates him from his family, profession and native place, but also throws him into prison and makes him serve at a harlot-house, where, to his utter dismay unfortunately to see there his daughter too. These incidents make him a disbeliever in God and all that is good and true and drive him to embrace evil and falsehood. Towards the close of the narrative, he proclaims from the house top as quoted earlier:

"So you know at last. I am a kamar from a far. hunger drove me from my native earth. Hunger took me to jail. From there I walked into hell"

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.200
itself. I saw the face of Evil

So through all these visions and scenes of hunger, we can say that no other novelist has depicted the image of hunger at such an epic scale as Bhattacharya has done. He has deftly delineated the human response to hunger. This response can evoke animalistic or angelic behaviour in man. When hunger smothers love, dignity, sympathy, pity and higher values of life, it turns man into an animal; when it brings forth concern to preserve the loved ones, it makes him an angel. A mother trying to bury her living child or selling her daughter into prostitution, a child fighting a dog for food, (So Many Hungers!) Kalo being forced to steal bananas and later taking to pimping, are some examples which depict how human beings can behave like animals in the face of hunger. A corollary of this is evidenced in the animal behaviour of those who are not confronted by hunger but who try to trade on human misery in their quest for gold. They are the archetypal devil figures, which we come across in Samarendra Basu, Sir Abalabandhu, and Seth Girish in So Many Hungers!; or in the doctor who “strips off skin and flesh” of dead bodies and ships the skeletons to “far countries across the black water”.

Along with the hunger for food, man’s unending hunger for worldly pleasures, material possessions and economic profits is also brought out in this book. Like So Many Hungers! this novel also elaborates on the hunger for pleasures and riches, which cause the hunger for food in its fiercest form in Bengal. People accumulate great quantities of rice and other food-grains with a view to increase their possessions and pleasures. As scarcity of food grows

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.239

2. Ibid., p.47
and as the masses die, they know that their “margin of profit” increases. Money is all important for them, and they are obsessed by the desire to get more and more of it because it is the only means of satisfying their hunger for pleasure. Sir Abalabandhu, who is ironically given this name, which means the brother of the helpless, is one such person in the novel. In fact of all forms of hunger, these two, that is—the hunger for food and the hunger for pleasure—have been repeatedly accentuated throughout the book:

“Two great hungers had struck the land of Bengal in the wake of war; the hunger of the masses of people uprooted from their old earth and turned into beggars, and the hunger of the all—owning few for pleasure and more pleasure, a raging fever of the times. Uprooted women with their own kind of hunger had to soothe the other hunger, had to cool the raging pleasure fever with their bodies.”

Hunger affects man adversely not only physically and mentally but also morally and spiritually. It uproots people’s faith in God and religion. Vishwanath, who comes in close contact with Kalo, is one such person whose faith is destroyed. He cannot understand why his grandchild, Meenu, dies of starvation. He ask Kalo: “only tell me why my little grandchild had to die of hunger? Would you blame a three year old girl for not having faith?” Neither Kalo nor he himself can revive his belief in God, as it is not possible for them

2. Ibid., p.53
3. Ibid., p.120
to find convincing answers to these questions. Hunger makes the sufferer a rebel protesting against God and Society. In Vishwanath and Biten’s company, there is born within Kalo a rebel and disbeliever and he is determined to be defiant and take revenge upon God and man,

“But questions arrived with hunger, faith weakened in the ashes of his last blowpipe fire. A small rebel was born when he sold his tools and set off for the big city. The rebel grew eyes and ears in court and prison, with the help of B-10, gave it a mouth and protest. Out of that protest he had acted mutinously, challenging man and God. With what result? He had put one mask to fight back as Brahmin. With each breath, he let himself sink deeper into “Sacrilege” that sacrilege which is Brahminic accounting, must bring about its retribution”.

Kalo often remembers the tragic story of a man named Ratandas of Shivpur village. In search of food, this man comes to the city of Calcutta, with his wife, daughter and two sons. But in the city his youngest child, a son dies of starvation. Not only this, one day while begging in the streets, he is separated from the rest of his family members and in spite of all possible efforts, never sees them again. His miserable life poses innumerable questions to Kalo:

“would the God bring back to him one of his kin, a son, a daughter or their mother? Just one, for he dared not asked for more, would not, the God take

1.Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.120-21
pity on a man who was close to the end of his days?\textsuperscript{1}

Thus anguish and physical torture caused by the hunger for food drive Kalo and Chandralekha to take revenge upon society and social laws. As a holy man of the temple in the disguise of Mangal Adhikari, Kalo befools the wealthy people, the creators of famine for the sake of satisfying their hunger for money and physical joys. In his role as Mangal Adhikari, he is not so much concerned with the questions of a living as with the questions of revenge. He explains to Lekha that we have got to hit back

"Through what better means than tempere? Let them pray to a false god. Let them seek benediction from a kamar. And let their proud woman, limbs draped in jewels and chastity, bow down to a girl who had almost fallen."\textsuperscript{2}

Notwithstanding the numerous evils emanating from hunger, there is one blessing in disguise, which accompanies this predicament, viz, elimination of caste. In fact, hunger does not discriminate between a man and man, between man of the highest caste and that of the lowest. No wonder, while talking about Obhijit, Kalo says to Motichand that like a hungry chamar or untouchable boy, "even a hungry Brahmin boy would eat from garbage cans\textsuperscript{3}.

Likewise, the hungry demonstrators do not think of caste even for a moment and live and work together to demand food. Millions of hungry people eat together at charity kitchens, oblivious of their caste and creed, thus completely rejecting a caste-ridden society.

\textsuperscript{1}Bhabani Bhattacharya, \textit{He Who Rides a Tiger}, p.130
\hfill
\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., p.97
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\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., p.218
According to Paul C. Verghese “Bhattacharya’s portrayal of the famine is exaggerated and cheap”¹, whereas Chandrasekharan feels that “most of the situations depicted in the novel are true to life in the country even at normal times, not to speak of the period of unusual hardships. One has only to go to the crowded streets and bazaars in any city to see the people wandering aimlessly without food, without clothes and without shelter”².

Besides the hunger for food; another theme in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s novel is “Freedom”. The hunger for freedom has been quite a favourite theme with most Indo-Anglian writers. In this novel though it is not the basic theme like physical hunger yet it is recurrent in his fiction. While for most of the novelists, the hunger for freedom refers to political freedom alone, for Bhattacharya it refers, to various other forms like economic and social freedom.

The type of freedom first dealt with in He Who Rides a Tiger is the one, which a prisoner longs for. Kalo is imprisoned for stealing bananas in a state of desperate starvation. During his stay in jail, his movements and time are not his own. He has to act according to the employee of jail. He is not free to sleep in his own way, he is directed to sleep at a particular time. So he finds the prison life very painful and craves for the liberty to live according to his own free will. But, the novelist points out that even in jail this blacksmith has at least the essential freedom of thinking and dreaming: “only his feelings and thoughts had been free, free to look forward to this moment of release, free to

¹.Paul C. Verghese, ‘Problems of Indian Novelist in English’, The Banasthali Patrika, No.12, 1969, p.87
².K.R. Chandrasekharan: op.cit., p.32
Kalo longs for complete independence. Imprisonment oppresses him so much so that he becomes oblivious of the terrible hunger, which has ruined him completely; he is alienated from his profession, blood relations and native place. Bhattacharya reveals his belief that man loves freedom above everything else by showing Kalo as a completely transformed man, filled with vigour and joy at the time of his release from jail:

"Kalo felt queer. A new warmth, the power of life itself, replaced the chill of dread he had been feeling. He was no longer a number in jail. The deadening yoke was off his shoulder. He was liberated at last."

He Who Rides a Tiger also deals with political freedom. There are numerous casual references to the Indian freedom struggle, especially the Quit India Movement. There is a vivid description of Indians sent to jail for participating in the memorable all India movement. Through Vishwanath, an interesting minor character in the novel, we learn how the prison cells are choked with men involved in the Movement. These freedom fighters are treated very shabbily, contemptuously and heartlessly by the Britishers and their Indian henchmen. They are looked down upon as stupidly and fruitlessly attempting to beat and scare away the mighty British lion by a comical tricolour flag. They are in no way considered better than mad men. The Englishmen and their puppets treat them derisively: "Quit India, indeed! would that the jail had a device to seal up mouths, or keep them wide open the

1. Bhabani Battacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.43
2. Ibid., p.44
way they were at the dentists”. But inspite of the derision and tyranny heaped upon them to crush the freedom struggle, the Quit India Movement grows in strength every day. Men from all social strata join it. Soon a large number of women belonging to all classes come out of their homes to participate in it, and thus assumes, the dimensions of a mass struggle. For every man’s voice that cries, “Quit India”, there is a woman’s voice also. This, indeed, shakes the foundations of the Great British Empire and makes the lovers of freedom confident of victory in the near future. Processions of men and women with tall banners in their hands are commonly seen everyday. Lathi charges and pistol firings by the white uniformed men on the freedom fighters are common events. It appears that the whole of India with “strength surging in their limbs” is willingly and joyfully ready to undergo imprisonment and confront all adverse conditions with unabated enthusiasm. Innumerable people are relentlessly tortured and imprisoned for the sheer quest for freedom and a dignified way of living:

“Imprisoned in the great Movement that shook the country. Imprisoned for no crime save the one of loving their country and asking a better way of life for it, a life free from hunger and indignity, a life built by hard self-denial which was a joy because each iron today was the framework of a secure, happier tomorrow.”

In this novel again Bhattacharya accentuates man’s need for individual

2. Ibid., p.177
3. Ibid., p.174-75
freedom. Though Lekha achieves immense fame and wealth as the daughter of Mangal Adhikari, the reputed priest of the famous temple of Shiva in Calcutta, yet she is not free to live in her own way. As a matter of fact, she is placed in a very dangerous situation like that of riding the tiger. She deeply desires to get rid of the life of strict restrictions. To achieve freedom, she is prepared even to marry the aged Motichand who already had married four times for she would gain freedom “to live her own way”\(^1\). Also:

“\(\text{She would find her place in life. She would not negate herself. By giving herself to Motichand, she would pay off her debt of love to her father and then at last have the right to be free}\)\(^2\)."

The novelist treats the theme of social freedom quite exhaustively as well in this novel. Kalo is a greater champion of social freedom than Jayadev of Music for Mohini. He is able to perform a miracle and becomes a great exponent of freedom. As a low-caste blacksmith he suffers immensely at rich people’s hands. Terribly upset, both mentally and emotionally by incidentally finding his daughter, Chandralekha, at a brothel, a mere object of richmen’s lust, he resolves to work hard for the social emancipation of the lowly and to take revenge on the wealthy who look down upon people like him and treat them inhumanly. He wishes to raise Chandralekha as high as the upper class people who have debased and maltreated her. “She was society’s scum in a truer sense than he. Her suffering had been incomparably more then his. She had to hit back”\(^3\). Kalo wants to fight not with a individual, but with the entire

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1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.230
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p.87
upper class that dominates society. He installs a false Shiva in the great city of Calcutta to put the true temple into the shade by the false one. He succeeds wondrously in befooling the rich and making them worship the false God in his temple and bow to Him. In his disguise of Mangal Adhikari, he is soon believed to be a true—hearted Brahmin under whose guidance and influence people can never lose faith in the social order and religion. Then he thinks of marrying his daughter to a Brahmin boy so that she may be relieved of her misery. He is extremely happy to think that he is able to shatter the caste barriers and that a kamar and his daughter easily command the respect of the people of the highest caste. He foresees his daughter’s bright future, “she would have to be ready to take her place as the wife of a Twice-born, which truly, meant so little”. Believing in social freedom, he is of the view that his daughter, richly deserves to marry an educated Brahmin boy because even as a kamar’s daughter, she is able to win the medal for being the best student of her class, though due recognition and encouragement are never given to her simply because she belongs to a lower caste. He governs the religious sentiments of the wealthy people corrupted by money and caste and makes them worship his simple hearted daughter as the “Mother of Sevenfold Bliss”. When he discloses his real identity to the people of Calcutta, the Brahmins and the wealthy people are panic-stricken, while the downtrodden masses hail him by crying repeatedly: “Victory to our Brother”. Voicing the feeling of the common folk, Biten proclaims that he is a great exponent of social freedom and his life will be a legend of freedom. He says, “you have triumphed over those others—and over yourself. What you have done just now will steel the

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The central metaphor of "He Who Rides a Tiger" is the relationship of caste to the inner being of a man. The sanctum of caste can be interpreted in many ways; through practice and pretension; and caste can also be abandoned by abandoning its outward manifestation. In this novel Kalo and Biten move in diametrically opposed directions. Kalo chooses an unusual name for his daughter, a name suggested by a Brahmin priest, and this act marks both the father and daughter as different from the others. It is also the beginning of a new awareness, the beginning of his dream for a better future for his daughter. Kalo's act of confession coincides with his desire to rebel against the social system, which has reduced him to a petty thief and his daughter to an inmate of a harlot house in Calcutta. His rebellion becomes one against the strong hold of caste. Kalo acquires the name of Mangal Adhikari and takes on the role of a Brahmin finding a new release in this transcendence of the status "that birth and blood had assigned him." This role becomes his weapon against society. Kalo does not attach much importance to the wearing of the sacred thread. It is a compromise akin to the wearing of a cap, irksome but necessary. And he wants Biten to wear it in order to facilitate his marriage with Lekha. But to Biten, a Brahmin by birth, the wearing of the sacred thread signifies the resurrection of the barriers he had tried to destroy, and a return to the bondage he had tried to escape. Lekha, too, chafes in the gilded cage of Brahminism.

Bhattacharya is opposed to exploitation—whether it is economic or caste-based. It comes out vividly in the protest of Kalo in the principle and in

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.244
2. Ibid., p.82
that of Biten. The village blacksmith and his daughter have to leave the village because of raging famine. It appears that Bhattacharya got his orientation not from his being a critic and thinker but from the tremendous impact of the Bengal famine. The memory of that event, like a troubling ghost, he wishes to exorcise by writing about it more than once. The girl has no other place to go to, except the brothel; there is no other way for her of supporting herself except through the wages of sin she might earn there. Kalo is given three months’ imprisonment just because he had stolen a few bananas. The old Sanskrit poet certainly had a more realistic appraisal of human nature when he asked, “what sin will a hungry man not commit?” than Bhattacharya’s bully of a magistrate who asks the convict, “why did you have to live?” We are told that Bikash Mukherjee is serving his prison term because he had protested against a policeman’s atrocities on a famished person whose only offence was that he could not take his eyes off the food stacked in an eating house in the city. The punishment, in each case, is far in excess of the crime, if it is a crime at all to keep one’s body and soul together.

He Who Rides a Tiger reflects a fiercer and sterner mood of the novelist than is seen in So Many Hungers!, which does not go beyond giving pathetic descriptions of suffering, passively endured. In this novel, on the other hand, is distinctly heard a note of angry protest and of revenge. The scum of the earth no longer want to be trampled upon. They are determined to hit back. They are taking out a procession shouting slogans like: “Food for all”, “Work for all”, and “Jail for the profiteers. In spite of all this, nothing happens. Here Bhattacharya is offering a programme of action against the corrupt bureaucrats, hoarders, profiteers and speculators. It is only through stratagem, by changing his caste and appropriating the name of Mangal Adhikari, that Kalo gets quits with his tormentors and persecutors;
interestingly, the magistrate also comes to touch his feet.

Bhattacharya’s bias against the caste system makes itself manifest in *He Who Rides a Tiger*: when Kalo names his daughter Chandralekha, he becomes an object of ridicule while trying to give her the odium of high as well as of low caste people of his town Jharna. Therefore, the only way he can think of raising himself is to assume for himself and his daughter the character and identity of a Brahmin. The point that Bhattacharya seems to be making is this: why should caste, real or assumed, confer such extra ordinary advantages on anybody?

Biten seems to be the novelist’s surrogate who renounces the sacred thread and his caste and also his real name after having seen his sister commit suicide as she was not allowed to marry the man she was in love with, because of his low caste. Bhattacharya’s reformist zeal spills over in some other directions also: the highly credulous Hindu masses who can be easily imposed upon in religious matters by cheating and scheming, the wanton waste of essential commodities (milk) for some supposed religious beliefs, the donors’ unabashed self-seeking and the exploitation of a religious institution by the powerful and the unscrupulous people for their own personal gain.

This novel also mirrors the callous and selfish attitude of the religious minded people. Bhattacharya exposes the wicked practices of the religious to exploit the blind faith of simple and credulous people. It seems as if religion has lost its pristine glory and forgotten its basic ethical values. It is turned into a spiritual merit in exchange for merchandise. Kalo’s fellow prisoner, B-10’s words, point to its symbolic meaning:

“Food for the soul is produced and sold like food for the stomach, and though the ways of the two trades are different, you pay
for both with hard cash. The temple is a market and the priest a dealer. People are always ready to pay well for feeding the inner man!”

Motichand is a rich stock broker who identifies religion with commercial interests, being mainly concerned with buying and selling. The pseudo religious people deny the dying man a chance of giving a milk bath to the idol of God. Kalo contemplates on “a curious contradiction of the time, while men died of hunger, wealth grew, and while kindliness dried up, religion was more in demand. It was only the outward form of religion, the shell of ritual empty within”

Chandrasekharan considers it “a novel of protest not only against a political and economic system which degrades the human being but also against an established social order which labels men as superior and inferior by virtue of the accident of their birth”. Thus the novel depicts the social conflict between the have and the have-nots, the exploiter and the exploited and the upper and lower castes and Kalo represents the rebel who protests against injustices because his “strength seemed based on an inner metal”, that stood the test of multiple pressures.

The novelist, significantly stresses the integration of the highest and the lowest castes. When the possibility of marriage between Biten and Chandralekha is being discussed by Biten and Kalo, the latter makes a very meaningful observation on life, thus unfolding the author’s concept of

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.41
2. Ibid., p.116
3. K.R. Chandrasekharan, op. cit., p.68
synthesis and its immense significance for human life: "In life, sometimes, a big compromise has to be made." And yet, there is no gainsaying the fact that Kalo's roots are "deep in the age-richened soil of his own caste." Another very significant aspect of social life realistically treated in the book is the fact that a man has unlimited sympathy and support for the people of his own class and contempt for those of the other classes. This is evident when Kalo sees the poor dying miserably under the impact of the ravenous hunger created by the rich for their profit. He reflects on the tragic lot of the poor:

"Were they doomed to haunt the earth forever as spectres?... No Brahmin priest spoke the timeless words from the Veda or applied the holy fire to the fleshless faces on the funeral pyres. Would the hundred thousand dead hover in unseen shapes over the great city eternally? Was heaven meant for the rich alone?"

Inspired and instigated by Biten, Kalo is set to demolish the caste system. He rejoices at his success "how he had fooled these creatures bloated with caste pride!" Thus he completely upsets the age-old social order by investing himself with Brahminhood and attaining to a high social status. Towards the close of the narrative, he derisively tells the so-called protectors and owners of society: "a downtrodden kamar has been in charge of

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, He Who Rides a Tiger, p.191
2. Ibid., p.12
3. Ibid., p.52
4. Ibid., p.218
your inmost souls, souls corrupt with caste and cash!"

Another important fact of that period which Bhattacharya has depicted in the novel is the condition of the prisons and the maltreatment of prisoners by Government officials. Through Kalo’s vision, we come to know the inhuman treatment meted out to the convicts in prison. He describes it to Chandralekha. The convicts work like oxen. Taking the sweat of their faces in their hands, they sing pathetically in a chorus:

"Eat this, the oil of our bones, eat. Take this to fry thy fish with. That for the egg apple curry thou fancy. And this to rub thyself with. Eat this, the oil of our bones, eat!"

The song of the prisoners’ hate-filled soul moves Kalo and his daughter deeply. The three brutal social realities—innocent girls’ going to a brothel under compulsion; innocent persons’ imprisonment for very ordinary and minor lapses; and the miserable life of the convicts in prison—lead Kalo and Chandralekha to wage a fierce battle against the vicious social order, “not a battle of survival but a hard-hitting attack”. Thus the novel stresses the importance of strength and wisdom to face the situation. The triumph of lower-class people like Kalo and Chandralekha and their deriding the society, which hates and insults them clearly shows the author’s love for human values.

The narrative design of Bhattacharya’s novel makes character and situation rooted in a historical as well as a contemporary context. Conflicts or

1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, p. 239
2. Ibid., p. 33
3. Ibid., p. 111
clashes of opposing ideologies is central to the narrative of most of his novels. He sometimes violates the chronology in his novels to achieve various artistic purposes. His favourite method of telling a story is the third person narration in a straight chronological order with occasional flashback but he, unlike R.K. Narayan in The Guide, does not make major changes in the chronological method of telling a story. He breaks the chronology or uses flashbacks at one point and that is either for the revelation of a character or to give some additional information where it is needed for the reader. One of the major effects that Bhattacharya achieves by breaking chronology is suspense, or what Beach terms his “story-telling strategy”. The details of an episode referred to are provided much later in the narrative.

Another important strategy that Bhattacharya uses in his novels is irony, which is an indirect and sophisticated way of saying things contrary to their evident meaning. It is, for example, ironical that the magistrate who had questioned the worth of Kalo’s life comes to touch his feet when the latter poses as Mangal Adhikari, least suspecting the imposture. His irony is accompanied by the comic vein, which emerges significantly in his description of characters as in his delineation of the character of Motichand.

As far as characters are concerned, Kalo is the central figure. Coming from the caste of kamar, Kalo, like Raju of The Guide, passes through the stages of becoming a thief, a prisoner, a corpse remover, a pimp, and finally a priest. His progression through these stages corresponds to the stages of his spiritual progress, climaxed by his spiritual triumph. By and large his character is well-drawn. Devoid of any motive of revenge, he would have.

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been a passive and parasitic human being. Bhattacharya has delineated him so skilfully that Kalo comes out as a well-portrayed human character in his strengths and weaknesses. Kalo’s daughter, Chandralekha, provides the impetus and force for her father’s actions to assure the survival of both himself and his daughter. Another character in the novel is the political prisoner, Biten; who breaks the barriers of caste and openly attacks religious and feudal prejudices. So, up to the last, Kalo, Lekha, Biten – all of them struggle for happiness and envisage it not in wealth, acquired through deceitful means, but in honest labour for the benefit of the people, in the struggle for freedom of the motherland.

The two main characters in the novel, however, are Kalo and Lekha: more specifically, it is Kalo around whom the web of events is woven and the development of whose character leads to the climactic confession, which is primarily devised to show the weight on his conscience and his subsequent release from the trammels of guilt. A confession of his feigned piety finally leads Kalo to the real piety; it ushers him into a path of courage and conviction. It is this gradual development of Kalo, this revelation of his character in action that endows him with the depth of the third dimension and makes this novel, in character-depiction as well as in narration an achievement in Bhabani Bhattacharya’s career as a novelist.