

# So Many Hungers by Bhabani Bhattacharya: Fight for Food and Freedom

**Dr. Anil Kumar**

Associate Professor, Department of English, S.D. College Kaler, Arwal

## Abstract

This paper explores the Indian cultural background through the themes of food and freedom in the novel renowned writer Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers*. The novel tackles various literal and metaphorical forms of hunger, such as poverty, famine, war, politics, imperialism, economic exploitation, and class consciousness. These themes are intricately connected to Bengali society's socio-political and economic conditions. Bhattacharya's work sheds light on the significant issues facing rural India before and after independence.

A prominent feature of Bhattacharya's fiction is the emphasis on the hunger for food and freedom. His novel displays a profound and passionate understanding of Indian life, characterized by social arising and protest. It vividly portrays the severe poverty of peasants, the intricacies of the Indian independence struggle, and the complex tragedy of the nation's division. Bhattacharya effectively captures the social and political transitions of the era, alongside the severe mental and physical suffering endured by poor peasants and labourers, particularly in Bengal and adjacent states.

Bhattacharya believes that an artist should move beyond merely creating a photographic or journalistic record of life and society. Instead, his depiction is profoundly reflective, encapsulating the essence of poverty, Indian culture, tradition, and the struggle for freedom. His narrative transcends superficial observations, providing a detailed perspective on the socio-economic and political challenges faced by Indian society.

In the novel, Bhattacharya offers a vivid representation of India's socio-political landscape. The novel's realistic portrayal of the period's hardships, coupled with its exploration of broader themes, delivers a thorough understanding of Bengal's cultural and historical context. Bhattacharya's work stands as a testimony to the resilience and essence of the Indian people, highlighting their persistent poverty, struggles and aspirations.

**Keywords:** Freedom, Famine, Imperialism, Poverty, Exploitation, Culture, Tradition

## Introduction

Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel *So Many Hungers* is set against the grim backdrop of the 1943 Bengal famine, a devastating event that resulted in the deaths of millions. Originating from the Bhagalpur district of the erstwhile Bengal Presidency, Bhattacharya weaves a narrative that intertwines the desperate hunger for food with the fervent hunger for independence. Set during the tumultuous 1940s, the novel captures the heightened intensity of the freedom struggle, driven by World War II and the Quit India movement. The plot centers on two main characters: Rahoul, a dedicated scientist, and Kajoli, a peasant girl. Their stories unfold against a backdrop of severe famine, highlighting the brutal conditions imposed by British

colonial policies. Bhattacharya skilfully portrays the emotional and physical anguish experienced by the people of Bengal during this period. In their efforts to support the colonial army, the British commandeered food supplies from Bengal, leaving the local population in dire straits. Additionally, food stocks were deliberately destroyed to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Japanese, perceived as a looming threat to India. This policy further exacerbated the suffering of the Bengali people.

Bhattacharya's novel goes beyond mere historical recounting; it delves into the emotional turmoil and human tragedy brought about by the famine. He vividly describes the conditions of the survivors, who often found themselves in situations worse than death. The portrayal of their plight serves as a poignant commentary on the inhumanity of the British wartime policies, which prioritized military needs over the well-being of the civilian population.

The dual themes of hunger for food and hunger for independence are seamlessly woven into the narrative, with the freedom struggle serving as a unifying thread. The characters' personal struggles and sacrifices reflect the broader national movement for independence, highlighting the interconnectedness of these two fundamental desires. The novel's depiction of the famine and its aftermath provides a stark notice of the human price of foreign rule and the pliability of those who fought for India's freedom.

Bhattacharya's ability to capture the essence of the Bengal famine and the fervour of the independence movement makes this novel a significant work in Indo-Anglian literature. Through his evocative storytelling, Bhattacharya ensures that the memories of those who suffered and struggled during this tumultuous time are not forgotten.

### **Exploration of Hungers**

B. Bhattacharya's initial novel, *So Many Hungers* explores the themes of hunger, freedom, and degradation in their various forms: hunger for food, sex, money, love, freedom, and recognition. These hungers are not confined to a specific place or community but are universal, relevant to the international community as well. Bhattacharya believed that art should have a purpose, and his novel reflects this view by addressing significant social issues.

The novel is a profoundly moving and inspiring toil of art, telling an ugly tale filled with misery, squalor, poverty, hunger, and the heroic suffering and sacrifices of its characters. Bhattacharya based the story on personally observed facts, which he reported faithfully. However, the novel transcends journalistic reporting through judicious selection, careful organization, and artistic control. Bhattacharya effectively portrays various forms of hunger, including the hunger for political freedom from imperialism, and the hunger for money, food, sex, and human dignity. Hunger also serves as a spiritual defence employed by freedom fighters who go on hunger strikes under the guidance of Devesh Basu.

In the novel, the starvation for food is depicted most vividly, showing how it can dehumanize individuals. Starving people forget their cultural and ethical values, quarrelling fiercely for scraps of food. The dire shortage of food forces a mother to eat while her child lies dead in her lap. Hunger also drives a girl to expose herself to men in exchange for morsels of food for herself and her loved ones. Bhattacharya paints a harrowing picture of this condition: "Wave after wave of hunger-stricken masses surging from the countryside. A countless many were in no fit state to eat solid food. They ate and expired. To give them rice was to slay them." ("*So Many Hungers!*", p.286).

This portrayal emphasizes the brutal reality of the famine, highlighting the extreme measures people took to survive. The novel's depiction of hunger and its significance serves as a powerful commentary on the

social and political issues of the time. Bhattacharya's work is a demonstration to the resilience and essence of the Indian mass, capturing their enduring struggles and aspirations.

*So Many Hungers* is valuable literature not only for its historical accuracy but also for its emotional depth and realistic portrayal of a critical period in Indian history. Bhattacharya's ability to capture the essence of the Bengal famine and the fervor of the independence movement makes this novel a significant work in Indo-Anglian literature. Through his evocative storytelling, Bhattacharya ensures that the memories of those who suffered and struggled during this tumultuous time are not forgotten.

Samarendra, a wealthy businessman, exemplifies the destructive hunger for wealth. His insatiable greed ultimately leads to his downfall, demonstrating how his love for money surpasses even his affection for his son. In contrast, Rahoul, Samarendra's son, represents the hunger for knowledge. He goes to Cambridge, earns a D.Sc. degree, and initially prioritizes his research over joining the National Movement, highlighting the tension between personal ambitions and national responsibilities.

Kunal's character embodies the hunger for military service, finding fulfilment only after enlisting in the army. Devata, driven by a deep desire to serve the poor and ignorant, achieves satisfaction through his selfless acts, even when it results in his arrest. His hunger for self-service eclipses all other desires, portraying a figure who has transcended personal needs through dedication to others.

Sir Abalabandhu symbolizes the insatiable hunger for name, fame, and money. His greed is never satisfied, and his death serves as the only end to his relentless pursuit of wealth and recognition. Bhattacharya contrasts these destructive hungers with acts of profound humanity and sacrifice, exemplified by two poignant examples. A young woman sacrifices her bodily sanctity to feed helpless destitute, and a beggar sells his meal ticket to someone needier. These acts underscore a hunger for sacrifice and altruism, highlighting the enduring spirit of humanity even in the face of dire adversity.

Balram S. Sorot comments on Bhattacharya's work, noting, "While in the novels of the Indian – English writers in general, the problem of conflict or synthesis between tradition and modernity figures as a secondary theme, in the writings of Bhabani Bhattacharya it assumes the significance of the dominating issue in contemporary Indian life. The author analyzes the political, religious, social, and economic problems of modern India through the perspective of this basic conflict in our ethos." (Sorot, 1991).

Bhattacharya's narrative skilfully presents the revolutionary spirit of the Indian masses and their participation in the independence movement. The novel captures the national rising against colonial rule and the significant influence of leaders like R.N. Tagore, M.Gandhi, and J.L. Nehru. His characters are deeply embedded in the socio-political context of the time, reflecting the collective consciousness and struggles of a nation on the brink of independence.

The author's keen eye for detail and his profound understanding of Indian culture, tradition, and religious beliefs are evident throughout the novel. Bhattacharya seamlessly integrates these elements into the narrative, making them an integral part of the story. His portrayal of India's socio-cultural fabric, moral values, and religious practices enriches the novel, providing a comprehensive and authentic depiction of the period.

### **Fight for Freedom**

At the beginning of Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel "So Many Hungers!", Rahoul is deeply engrossed in his studies and research at Cambridge University, seemingly detached from the turmoil in India. However, the devastating Bengal famine and the resulting deaths of millions profoundly impact him. Rahoul's lofty ideals and sophisticated views of life and human beings mark him as an idealist. He aspires to drive societal

change with his optimistic and idealistic perspective on life and society, firmly believing that the sacrifices made by individuals will not be in vain but will bring about positive change in Bengal amid this man-made catastrophe.

Despite being the son of a wealthy businessman and profiteer, Rahoul extends free help to the impoverished and needy who are suffering from the famine. This selflessness sharply contrasts with his father, Samarendra Basu, who is depicted as shrewd and greedy, lacking concern for the nation or society. Samarendra's sole aim is to accumulate wealth, and recognition by currying favour with the British people. His business company, 'Cheap Rice Ltd,' exploits farmers by purchasing rice at low rates and hoarding it to sell at exorbitant prices later. Samarendra takes pride in his sons, but his dreams are shattered when he learns that Kunal, Rahoul's younger brother, is missing in Italy, and Rahoul has been arrested in connection with the Quit India Movement.

Kunal, although present only in the earlier part of the novel, is depicted as a lovable and spirited young man, embodying noble ethics and a cheerful disposition. He leaves home to serve as an army officer in North Africa and Italy, after which his fate remains unknown. This absence contrasts with the continuous presence and development of Rahoul's character, who becomes increasingly involved in the national struggle and social issues as the story progresses.

Rahoul's grandfather, Devish Basu, known as Devata, is a revered figure in the village of Baruni, embodying Gandhian principles. Devata's character represents Mahatma Gandhi's ideals of dignity, courage, truth, and moral values. He instils in Rahoul a trust in existence and a commitment to social welfare. Devata always prioritizes the villagers' well-being, advising them not to sell rice to government agents and protecting them from exploitation by tradesmen and hoarders. The moral and ethical conflicts within the narrative are highlighted through Devata's opposition to Samarendra. While Samarendra seeks personal gain at the expense of others, Devata strives for the common good, advocating for justice and compassion. This contrast extends to Rahoul, who, influenced by Devata's principles, becomes a beacon of hope and change in a society ravaged by famine and colonial exploitation.

In the novel, the village of Baruni serves as a microcosm of India, mirroring the nation's agitation and fervour during Gandhi's well-known Quit India Movement. Devish Basu, a true follower of Gandhi, encourages the villagers to resist the unjust rulers by refusing to pay taxes. The story of the peasant girl Kajoli highlights another dimension of hunger in the novel, focusing on poverty, destitution, and the desperate need for food. Rahoul is a central figure in the novel, representing the educated, progressive, and strong youth of India. Initially engrossed in his studies at Cambridge University, Rahoul is profoundly affected by the Bengal famine and the ensuing deaths. He is determined to bring about social change based on his optimistic and idealistic view of life and society. Despite being the son of a wealthy businessman and profiteer, he offers free help to the poor and needy during the famine. This selflessness contrasts sharply with his father, Samarendra Basu, whose sole aim is to amass wealth and fame by pleasing the British rulers. Kunal, Rahoul's younger brother, is depicted as a spirited and noble young man who leaves home to serve as an army officer. However, his presence is limited to the earlier part of the novel. Rahoul's transformation from a detached scholar to an active participant in the national struggle exemplifies the novel's exploration of sacrifice and the pursuit of social justice.

Devata's character is based on Mahatma Gandhi and represents his principles of dignity, courage, truth, and moral values. He advises the villagers not to sell rice to government agents, protecting them from exploitation by tradesmen and hoarders. Devata's opposition to Samarendra highlights the moral and

ethical conflicts within the narrative, with Samarendra seeking personal gain at the expense of others, while Devata strives for the common good.

Rahoul's encounter with his grandfather in Dehradun jail deepens his commitment to the national cause. He plunges into the Quit India Movement and is eventually arrested. At the prison gate, he joins other prisoners in singing Tagore's memorable song, "The more they tighten the chains, the more the chains loosen." The novel concludes with Rahoul's voluntary imprisonment for the country's freedom. The tragedy of Kajoli's family symbolizes the broader devastation affecting all of Bengal. Through his intricate narrative, Bhattacharya successfully intertwines the themes of political freedom and personal suffering, providing a poignant commentary on the resilience and spirit of the Indian people during one of the most challenging periods in their history.

### Conclusion

The novel is both poignant and multifaceted, encapsulating the novel's themes of resilience, sacrifice, and the unyielding spirit of the Indian people in the face of immense adversity. As the narrative draws to a close, the intertwined stories of Rahoul and Kajoli, set against the harrowing backdrop of the Bengal famine and the fervent Quit India Movement, come to a powerful culmination.

Rahoul's journey is emblematic of the transformative power of empathy and commitment to social justice. Initially detached from the immediate struggles of his homeland, Rahoul's exposure to the devastating effects of the famine profoundly changes him. His idealistic vision, influenced by his grandfather Devata's Gandhian principles, evolves into actionable compassion. By the end of the novel, Rahoul has fully embraced his role in the fight for India's freedom. His arrest during the Quit India Movement is not a moment of defeat but a testament to his unwavering dedication to the cause. As he stands at the prison gate, singing Tagore's song with fellow prisoners, Rahoul symbolizes the collective resilience and hope of the Indian people. This act of solidarity underscores the belief that the more the chains of oppression tighten, the more the spirit of freedom loosens and spreads.

Kajoli's story, marked by profound personal loss and suffering, also concludes on a note of resilient endurance. Her life, marred by the brutal realities of the famine, reflects the severe impact of colonial exploitation on the most vulnerable. Yet, even in the depths of despair, Kajoli's character embodies the strength and perseverance of ordinary people. Her experiences highlight the stark contrast between those who exploit and those who endure. The sacrifices of her family members, particularly the moral fortitude shown by figures like Devata, serve as a beacon of hope and integrity in a time of widespread corruption and greed.

Samarendra Basu's downfall serves as a moral lesson within the narrative. His relentless pursuit of wealth at the expense of humanity ultimately leads to his emotional and personal ruin. The simultaneous news of Kunal's disappearance and Rahoul's imprisonment shatters his dreams, illustrating the futility and destructiveness of his greed. Samarendra's character arc serves as a stark reminder of the ethical consequences of prioritizing personal gain over communal well-being. Bhattacharya's masterful storytelling ensures that these two threads are not merely parallel but interwoven, reflecting the interconnectedness of political freedom and social justice. The historic Quit India Movement, symbolizing the fight against British colonial rule, is paralleled by the everyday battles against hunger and destitution faced by characters like Kajoli and her family. This dual focus amplifies the novel's central themes, emphasizing that the fight for national freedom is intrinsically linked to the fight for human dignity and survival.



Overall, it transcends its historical setting to deliver a timeless message about the human condition. It highlights the myriad forms of hunger—physical, emotional, and spiritual—that drive human actions and shape destinies. Through the resilience of characters like Rahoul and Kajoli, Bhattacharya celebrates the indomitable spirit of those who strive for a better future, despite overwhelming odds. The novel ultimately affirms the power of hope, solidarity, and moral integrity in overcoming the profound challenges posed by oppression and deprivation.

## References

1. Badal, R. K. (1975). An outline of Indo-Anglian Literature. Pakash Book Depot, p.130.
2. Bhattacharya, B. (1987). “So Many Hungers”, New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, Print.
3. Chandrasekharan, K R. (1974). Bhabani Bhattacharya. New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, p.32.
4. Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. Indian Writing in English, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, pp.324-413.
5. Kumar, S.(2024). Sufferings of women in P. Sivakami’s The Taming of Women. *International Research Journal of Education and Technology*. 6(2) <https://zenodo.org/doi/10.5281/zenodo.11630765>
6. Kumar, S. (2024). Role of Dalit Literature in Social Change in India. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*. 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2024.v06i03.22076>
7. Sorot, S. B. (1991). The Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya, Prestige Books, New Delhi, P.53 “The Women in Bhattacharya's Novels," *World Literature Written in English* 1 (April 1972).