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**Quit India Movement: An Analysis of Bhabani Bhattacharya's
*So Many Hungers!***

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ABSTRACT: Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the most prominent and widely acclaimed Indian English novelists. His novel entitled *So Many Hungers!* brings to light the circumstances behind the Bengal Famine of 1943 and the effect of Quit India Movement through the major characters in the novel. He has portrayed the socio-political and economic changes in India on the background of the contemporary historical events and social conditions. The novelist depicts the problems, trials, and tribulations faced by Indian people. The exclamation mark of the end of the title of the novel *So many Hungers!* justly denotes the writer's bewilderment at the multiplicity of hungers such as hunger for political freedom, hunger for imperial expansion, hunger for money, hunger for food, hunger for human dignity and self-respect and hunger as a spiritual weapon employed by the freedom fighters. The novel reflects the fact that the national movement affected the lives of all sections of the nation –men and women, young and old, intellectuals and workers, people from the cities and people from the countryside. The present paper attempts to highlight the effects of Quit India Movement in particular.

Keywords: Movement, Hunger, Freedom, Famine, Poverty.

Bhabani Bhattacharya (1906-1988) was born in a Bihari Brahmin family. He studied English Literature at Patna University and began to write in Bengali for magazines. Later, he wrote in English and translated Bengali writings into English. His English articles appeared in *The Spectator* which encouraged Bhattacharya to write in English. Bhattacharya went to London to study History and returned home with a Ph.D degree in 1934. He returned to India at that time when the country was witnessing the social reforms and left-wing radical politics. People regarded Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi as the supreme leader of the nationalist movements against the British colonial rule. In 1936, Tagore offered Bhattacharya a teaching position at Santiniketan. Bhattacharya declined the offer because he did not wish to be overshadowed by the former. He worked as a freelance journalist in the early 1940s. He witnessed how the Bengal famine changed the fate of people. This famine forced him to abandon journalism and to embrace creative writing. The novelist stated in an interview: "The emotional stirrings I felt (more than two million men, women and children died of slow starvation amid a man-made scarcity) were a sheer compulsion to creativity. The result was the novel, *So Many Hungers!*" (Bhabani Bhattacharya, *Contemporary Novelists* 71).

The Bengal Famine of 1942-43 killed millions of people and Bhattacharya was filled with a rage that clamored to be expressed. Bhattacharya's opinion about the Bengal famine and freedom struggle resulted in his first novel *So Many Hungers!* This novel deals with the major events preceding the Independence of India. It also brings to light the hunger for liberty, hunger for food, hunger for authority, hunger for sex, hunger for wealth, and hunger for recognition. The novelist has used two plots to scrutinize the causes and effects of hunger. First plot of the novel depicts the rich family of Samarendra Basu. He lives at Calcutta with his two sons. The second plot portrays the story of a peasant girl named Kajoli. Devesh Basu, father of Samarendra Basu, connects these two plots and he lives with peasant folks at Baruni. In this respect, K.R. Chandrasekharan has rightly and aptly observed:

Rahoul's story is a representation in miniature of the struggle for freedom. The sad tale of Kajoli is likewise a pathetic record of what happened to more than two million people who become victims of a famine, which was not an act of God, but which was brought about by the rapacity and selfishness of profiteers and the indifference of an alien government.

In the opening of the novel, Rahoul is busy with his studies at Cambridge University. He has no concern regarding India. However, he becomes upset when he comes to know about the historic famine of Bengal which resulted into the deaths of millions of people in India. He aspires to bring social change in the society on the basis of his optimistic and ideal view of life. The second chapter of the novel highlights the optimism of Rahoul about man and



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Lala Hansraj Puthela College of Law Sirsa

society. He is absolutely sure that the sacrifice of men and women will bring change in Bengal. Rahoul, son of a rich trade man and profiteer, offers free help to the poor and needy people suffering from a great man-made human tragedy. His younger brother, Kunal Basu, is equally affectionate character. He is a spirited and adventurous young man who has noble ideals and cheerful disposition. He hears over the radio that the Great Britain has announced war with Germany. He decides to join the British army in order to prove himself: "We're as good in battle as our proud rulers. We can play their game quite as well" (40). However, the fact remains that his presence is limited to only in the earlier part of the novel. Nothing is heard about him after his leaving home for service in North Africa and Italy as an army officer.

The present novel is filled with the details of Quit India Movement and justly shows the effects of the same on people. It would not be an exaggeration to say that no historian could describe these barbaric events with such liveliness and clarity as Bhattacharya presents them in this novel. The police swing their lathis and open fire on the masses in order to suppress the rebellion. The Government is determined to smash the movement. On the other hand, the patriots are convinced that India has to be independent. Thousands of people move from one place to another carrying with them the tricolour national flags. Most of the flags have a number of holes in them made by bullets. The flag saluting ceremonies are organised even in villages. The leaders like Devata "spoke the new mind, the new words, of the national movement". Women participate in these ceremonies as courageously as men. Indians bubble over with energy, enthusiasm and courage. People are possessed with ideas just like Rahoul:

The soul of a race, as the soul of a man, does not grow only in terms of timespace.....Once in a while, through the catalysis of experience, it grows far more in moments than in years. This is such a moment of quick growing, and India after August will never be the India of before.

Rahoul's father, Samarendra Basu is a barrister-cum-stock market speculator. He looks forward to unstoppable profit, "a storm in the share market" (5). However, Rahoul is interested in probing the political and economic implications of the war for the nation: "But could people step out into a war said to be waged for democratic freedom, so long as that freedom was denied them? India in bondage asked to fight for world freedom!" (9) Samendra Basu has nothing in common not only with his sons but also with his father, Devish Basu. Devish Basu is popularly known as Devata (meaning God) and he lives in a distant village called Baruni. Devish actively participates in the Gandhian movement of national liberation through truth and non-violence. On the other hand, Samendra Basu is a shrewd and greedy person who has no feeling for the nation or society.

His only ambition in life is to be a wealthy man. He continues to please the British rulers in order to achieve name and fame. He owns a trade company named 'Cheap Rice Ltd' collects rice from the farmers on cheap rate and boards it to sale it later on high prices. Samarendra asks Rahoul when the war begins: "steel will rise steeply, so will gold—which to choose?" (6). He considers that war is "the most enriching industry" (17), "a God-sent opportunity" (31), and that the share market will be booming with speculation on demand and supply. According to Samarendra, one needs to liquidate everything and invest it in the right speculation. Bhattacharya uses an innovative prose style which reminds of John Steinbeck. Bhattacharya gives a description of people buying and selling war material: "Gold rush in Clive Street. A motley crowd surging by the Stock Exchange Empty your pockets. Take a loan from friends. Mortgage your house. Sell, sell your gold, the gold on the body of your wife" (15–16). This shows not only the rise of stock markets in wartime but also the sheer madness of the profit economy. On one side, people were dying in order to protect the mother nation. On the other hand, people were concerned about making money in such difficult times.

The hopes of Samarendra Basu sink as British forces start losing in Europe. Soon, he realizes that all his wealth is gone: "His large profits had been wiped clean as though they were a mere figure on the plate" and that leads to "sleepless nights" and "half-suppressed sobbing" (34). However, his luck is restored again when the British army begins to win crucial battles. Bhattacharya suggests that it was difficult to resist such an attractive form of capitalism. The narrator discloses: "Samarendra had no other thought...no other interest, no other dream. He and his colleagues worked feverishly building up the business" (39).

The novelist portrays Samarendra Basu as a proud father. He is proud of the fact that both his sons are working for the betterment of people's condition after the famine. However, he does not share the interest of his sons. Towards the end of the novel, his dreams are shattered when the report of Kunal missing in Italy and the news of Rahoul's arrest come simultaneously to him in connection with the historic Quit India Movement. When Rahoul is being taken to prison, Rahoul reflects upon these varieties of freedom: "There it was, the freedom from want, even if the four of them, the charter of rights of a hunger-tossed century, did not include the freedom to be free." He understands that



SPECIAL EDITION: INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Lala Hansraj Puthela College of Law Sirsa

freedom is not a dew dropping from heaven all itself. He knows that freedom is something to be obtained from far-off lands. He believes that freedom is to be achieved by persistent struggle and is to grow out of man's spirit. This realization about freedom dawns upon him suddenly on hearing Tagore's song. In that moment, he becomes confident that this type of freedom will surely be attained by Indians:

Listening, Rahoul began to lose his sadness, for in that instant he saw past the clouds of pain—he saw the horizon of the east illumined by a new dawn. Freedom could not drop from the skies, nor be asked from lands beyond the seas; but there, in the vast swamp of suffering and struggle, would it break into bloom, growing out of the seeds of the spirit. It was the four-petaled lotus of the people.

Samrendra Basu's father Devish Basu, popularly known as Devata is a prototype of Gandhiji himself. He is beloved and venerated by the people of Baruni village. He has infused Rahoul with trust in existence. In reality, the character portrayal of Dervish Basu is based on Gandhiji. He represents Gandhiji's ideals of life with all its dignity, courage and strength of truth and moral values. He always remains concerned about the wellbeing of the villagers. It would not be wrong to state that he cares less for his own son and his own family but cares way more for the village and the society in general. He suggests that the villagers should not sell rice to the government agents. In this way, he tries to save them from their exploitation at the hands of tradesmen and hoarders of rice. The village portrayed in the novel is Baruni. This village is a miniature India and it agitates and gathers momentum in the wake of Gandhiji's famous Quit India Movement. Dervish Basu, like a true follower of Gandhiji, requests the people of the village to not pay taxes to the unjust ruler.

The author reveals the dark shade of hunger through the moving story of Kajoli and her family. Kajoli, the heroine of the present novel, is a peasant girl of fourteen who dreams for a beautiful future life. Her dream breaks horribly, as it says 'it never rains but pours'. Her father and elder brother actively participate in the freedom struggle of India and that is why they are sent to the prison. In the absence of her father and her elder brother, Kajoli fulfills the responsibilities of her younger brother and aged mother. However, when the time comes, she does not get any support from the family. She works hard in the field to look after the needs of her family. Later in the novel, she gets married to Kishore who lives in a city. Unfortunately, her sweet dream of future life shatters due to the arrival of a tempest of famine. Her husband, Kishore decides to follow the path of other villagers to city because he does not find any work in the village. However, not all the plans turn into reality as it is said 'man proposes and God disposes'. Kishore is killed by a sentry on his way to Calcutta by mistaken identity. Kajoli remains unaware of this fact and she continues to wait for her Godot, Kishore, till the end of the novel. Kajoli attempts to fight back but the demon of hunger grows bigger with each passing moment.

In the novel, Bhattacharya depicts the helplessness and pathetic condition of the villagers, peasants and labourers. All of them are leaving their homes and marching towards the big city in search of food and jobs—millions of men, women and children rendered homeless and penniless by this calamity. The sufferings faced by Kajoli and her family on her way to Calcutta are not theirs only but of all those people who entered into the city in search of food and help. On the way, Kajoli is raped by a sexually starving soldier who leaves her to bleed helplessly. In this condition, a jackal attempts to eat up Kajoli. However, younger brother of Kajoli, Onu, somehow manages to drive it away. She is sent to a hospital by the repentant soldiers. In this way, she manages to save her life. The aged mother of Kajoli and her younger brother, Onu, are left with no other choice but to beg on the streets of the city in order to survive. When Kajoli gets a piece of bread from a soldier she forgets her mother and brother:

...instantly she dug teeth into the lump, swallowing swiftly, not chewing, not lingering for the feel of bread on her tongue, swallowing hard. And the soldier clacked his tongue with pity, for his hearth was worm. He watched her... in a minute the bread was all gone, and then the realization burst upon her that she had eaten all; nothing was left for her brother, her mother nothing. (144)

In the current novel, the city itself presents the pathetic plight of the poor people. Every day, numerous poor people come to the city in search of food and job but there is no body to help them. Even the government officials fail to do anything to overcome the man made crisis. The novelist shows that on one hand the countrymen were struggling for the independence of India. On the other hand, people were dying due to this man made famine. The present novel is filled with the examples of brutality which take place due to famine or hunger for food. At times, hungry people eat what the animals refuse to take. In this struggle for food, animals usually prove to be the strongest and the folks appear to be the weakest. Sometimes, boys fight with boys for scrap of food. Kajoli finds it extremely



SPECIAL EDITION: INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Lala Hansraj Puthela College of Law Sirsa

difficult to maintain her family in such a situation. She even decides to go to a brothel. On the way to the brothel, she hears the newspaper vendor's voice who informs people about Devata's death in the prison in Dehradun. It reminds her the words of Devata and she chooses to earn an honest living by becoming a newspaper vendor in the city. Kh. Kunjo Singh justly states: "Indeed, the novel unfolds the mental agonies of the people during the war period because of the misrule and wrong policies of the unfavorable British government. The novel deals with the destiny of a whole populace and not that of an individual. Such aspects of disintegration and social cataclysm is shown in Boris Pasternak's Dr. Zhivago".

The story of Kajoli represents another hunger in the novel. Her story focuses on the issues of poverty, destitution and hunger and food caused by the man made famine. It also shows the effect of Quit India Movement on the lives of people. Devesh Basu and Kajoli's father and brother have shown hunger for freedom. Rahoul feels pity and sympathy for the poor people. He decides to work for the victims of hunger. The following description in the novel is concerned with hunger in the big city: "He had died for lack of food, so it was reported, and the brief news flashed past almost unnoticed. A mere beggar. No one of them felt that he was a Premonition, a symbolic shape of things to come. Other man sank down and died"(104-105).

Bhattacharya seems to accuse the poor for their situation but he believes that their faith in God gives them courage to fight against hunger. Rahoul runs a free kitchen for the poor people. And on the other side, his father plans to sell rice. He goes into black market for that purpose. Rahoul expresses his agony:

...The empty stomach was due to no blight of nature, no failure of crops Rahoul knew. It was man-made scarcity, for the harvest had been fair, and even if the Army bought up big stocks, with rationing at the right level there could be food for all. But there was no rationing. (105)

There was not even one strata of society which was not involved in the Quit India Movement. The students were equally on the verge of revolt. They became one with the masses and the soldiers of 'Free India'. In many families, there are no adults to look after their families. The novelist has aptly depicted how the freedom struggle assumed new dimensions:

Meantime 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 a hurried trial—peasant lads had gone to the rope-crying with their last breath, Victory, victory to freedom!

The prisoners start hunger strike in the jails to support Quit India Movement as the freedom fighters carry on their movement even in jails. "Undefeated, all. No jail-house could ever break their spirit." The entire country roars that the alien rulers need to quit. Indian wives are projected as absolutely courageous women who are prepared to follow the footsteps of their husbands way by defying the British. The crowds of freedom fighters go to the prison-houses with a sense of victory and no sign of defeat could be heard in their voices. Devata goes to the prison many a times but the prisons could not cover his spirit of freedom. The novel concludes with the description of inspired people who sing loudly in chorus the following immortal lines of Rabindranath Tagore: "The more their eyes redden with rage, the more our eyes open; the more they tighten the chains, the more the chains loosen!"

Without a doubt, movements have always affected the lives of people and the current paper highlights the same while analyzing Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!*. Keeping in view the above discussion, it can be stated that the present novel is about impact of Quit India Movement on the masses of India. It highlights the existing pressing problems of India, especially the rural India, before and after the Independence. The stories of Rahoul and Kajoli are intermixed to expose the two prominent themes of the novel – freedom and hunger. The novel is replete with the examples of hunger for political freedom, hunger for imperial expansion, hunger for money, hunger for food, hunger for human dignity and self-respect and hunger as a spiritual weapon employed by the freedom fighters.

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