

## **Hunger and Crime: An Analysis of Crimes Related to Hunger in Indian Literature**

**Yadu R Krishna, M.A. English**

Hunger is a major issue that had been dealt in various literatures through the ages. Poverty and hunger has served and is still serving as a major theme for most of the writers in the world. There are various works of literature around the world that deals with these and various other issues that are caused by them. One such major issue is crimes related to hunger. Hunger is a powerful element and the pangs of hunger can even bring out the brutality in humans. Crime and hunger had always been proportional to one another, a society where the rate of hunger is high the crime rate also tend to increase. Crimes that are related to hunger range from petty thefts to brutal murders and such cases have been reported in the course of literature.

Indian writers started to give a realistic and modern approach to novel writing only after the contact with British writers until then the main of the Indian literature was to teach moral values. In the book *Indo-Anglican literature: 1800 to 1970*, H.M. Williams says, "It is undoubtedly the most popular vehicle for the transmission of Indian ideas to the wider English-speaking world." Following this change the writers began to write about themes that were more realistic and one such major issue is hunger. Hunger according to *Macmillan English dictionary* means a lack of food that can cause illness or death. Famines, revolutions, wars, partitions, unemployment and many more can be named as the major causative of hunger in Indian history and many of the Indian novels have portrayed these incidents. Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandaya, K. S. Venkataramani, Arundhati Roy and Bhabani Bhattacharya are few of the writers who have dealt with the theme of hunger and an intense study into their novels would reveal them dealing with contemporary Indian society and the problems it faces. One such problem is crimes that are caused by hunger. Most of the novels that deals with poverty and hunger, one could find characters that are forced to commit criminal activities like stealing and physical abuse for the sake of food. The main objective of the researcher in this paper is to identify and analyse such crimes that are engendered by hunger and how food insecurities and hunger are portrayed in Indian novels. The researcher has incorporated situational analysis and a case study analysis to identify these types of crimes in the Indian society. The case study that the researcher has selected is that of a tribal youth who was beaten to death by a mob for stealing food from a shop in Kerala.

Indian English novelists such as Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandaya, K. S. Venkataramani, Arundhati Roy, Bhabani Bhattacharya and many others have portrayed poverty and hunger with at most truth and realism in their novels. Mulk Raj Anand has showed exquisitely a realistic picture of poverty and hunger in the lives of untouchables and downtrodden through the

novels like *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *Two leaves and a bud*. Kamala Markandaya also portrays the theme of hunger in her novels *The Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice*. The novels *Kandan*, *The Patriot* and *Murugan*, *The Tiller* by K. S. Venkataramani also show the poverty-stricken life of peasants and their striving for food. Among all the other writers Bhabani Bhattacharya has dealt the problem of hunger in a much more humanistic way. His novels *He Who Rides a Tiger* and *So many Hungers* presents a gruesome picture of the Bengal famine in 1943. Quoting the words of the author- "... the plague of hunger in the wave of war... no rationing of food-grains, no price control, no chocking of giant sharks who play cornering game on a stupendous scale... barns are empty — the peasants had been induced to sell off their grain. Markets are empty-the grain is hidden away... And now the rice was five times the old rate, weavers sold their looms to traders from big cities... Artisans sold their tools. Fishermen's boats were chopped up for fire wood to sell... The plague washed up in fierce tides" (*He Who Rides a Tiger*, p.15).

Although all these novels focus on the theme of poverty and hunger, in most of these novels there are occurrences of incidents where a character in the novel commits a criminal activity as like stealing or physical abuse for the sake of food. As like in the novel *He Who Rides a Tiger*, the protagonist of the novel Kalo steals three ripe bananas from a lady, during a train ride, to satiate his hunger but he is arrested for this offence and tried. During which he pleads guilty and says "I was hungry, sir. A Madness came upon me. It was because I thought I had to eat, or I would die. A madness came upon me. I had to live." (*He Who Rides a Tiger*, p.31).

Similarly, in the novel *So Many Hungers*, Bhattacharya, as the title suggests, presents a horrendous picture of hunger and poverty engendered by the Bengal famine of 1943. The novel portrays certain brutal crimes that were caused by hunger like a mother burying a new born baby alive as she doesn't have enough breast milk as she herself is starving, men fighting and hurting each other like dogs for the food in dustbins and women fighting with the cleaners so that they can get food out of the waste before the cleaners remove them. The author paints a picture which shows how brutal hunger can make a man. Similar incidents can be seen in most of the novels dealing with poverty and hunger as like a man killing another man for the sake of a loaf of bread or mob robbing shops and godowns for food supplies etc... These incidents are not just part of literature. These incidents are not just history, such incidents and crimes still happen around the world. Literature even today discusses about them as like in Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) shows how youngsters join terrorist groups because of their poverty and they are ready to even give their lives for decent food.

There were many such real-life incidents reported in many parts of India. One such incident occurred in 2018 where a tribal youth, Madhu was beaten to death by a mob of youngsters. Madhu was allegedly beaten by a mob for stealing and even before the arrival of police the mob had killed Madhu by repeated assault. When the police enquired they found that the man had stolen some food supplies, accusing him for stealing food supplies the mob had mercilessly beaten the man to death. This incident throws light on the crimes people commit for the sake of satiating one's hunger and the societies view about such crime. India being the birth place of the poet Subramanya Bharathi who

sang “ThaniOruManithanukkuUnavuIllai EnilInthaJagathinaiAzhithiduvom” which means if a person doesn’t have food, the entire universe will be destroyed, is where such a gruesome act of inhumaneness has occurred. This particular incident also teaches the attitude of the society towards starvation and poor. What he stole is rice. The reason why he did that was hunger. The constitution of India provides the right to food under the Article 47, according to it “The State shall regard the raising of the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health as among its primary duties and, in particular, the State shall endeavour to bring about prohibition of the consumption except for medicinal purpose of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health.” In spite of all these the country still has lot of issues related to poverty and there are crimes that are caused by hunger still prevalent and the incident of the tribal youth, Madhu is one such.

Hunger can be defined differently depending upon individual’s choice, it may be an act of sacrifice for few or may be an act of prayer or even an act of protest but for some people it is a reality and not by their choice. The plights of such people who are forced to commit crimes just to satiate their hunger are still left unattended. Stealing the property of others or physically abusing someone are all crimes under the laws of judiciary but on a humanitarian ground such acts that are committed for the sake of food to satiate hunger should never be considered as a crime. The researcher doesn’t promote these crimes but recommends a humanitarian outlook to these crimes and the only solution to prevent such crimes are the eradication of poverty and provision of better food supplies to the population.

---

### References

1. Bhattacharya, Bhabani. *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Arnold Associates, 1996.
2. Food and Agriculture Organization, "The right to food in national constitutions", *The Right to Food in Theory and Practice*, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, ISBN 92-5-104177-6, archived from the original on 17 July 2012.
3. Nayak, Mangala L. “Bhabani Bhattacharya’s Novels: The Portrayal of Famine and Hunger.” *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, no. 1, 2017.
4. Williams, Hayden M. *Indo-Anglian Literature: 1800-1970; a Survey*. South Asia Books, 1977.

---

Yadu R Krishna, M.A. English  
Bharathiar University  
[madyof.r2@gmail.com](mailto:madyof.r2@gmail.com)