

HUNGER AS A METAPHOR IN INDRA SINHA'S *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE*

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Hunger is the fundamental reality of life. An individual can lead a life of happiness only when he is physically and mentally at peace. Physical hunger is a curse. Hunger makes an individual commit crime like theft, murder, adultery, and forces him for malpractices. Violence becomes means for satisfying the pangs of hunger. Poverty, exploitation, hunger are like incurable diseases, suffered by the unprivileged class. They carry with them humiliation, harsh realities of life, and hatred for the privileged class. They remain poor and hungry and struggle for survival. Facing the high and low tides of the miseries of life is a challenge for them. Circumstances, helplessness, existing social patterns, class conflict, horrors of war, famine, industrial crisis, man-made scarcity of food, exploitation, injustice are some of the causes of public indignation which is vividly portrayed in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007). Indra Sinha, born in India, is now settled in France. His non-fiction work, *The Cybergypsies*, and his first novel, *The Death of Mr. Love*, got widespread critical acclaim. His novel *Animal's People* was short listed for the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2007.

'Animal' is the central character around whom the story revolves. He is tempted to tell his story by offering him Rs. 50 and kebabs. Animal calls the readers 'eyes'. He is a miserable victim of an industrial crisis. An American chemical factory leaked one night and the Khaufpur people's life became miserable because of the poisonous gases. Many died, many suffered, many became deformed. Animal too lost his parents and to add to the wretchedness one day he had an intense burning in the muscle and his spinal cord bend

reducing him to a mere animal. Animal begins the narration by telling the eyes of his existing condition. He mentions,

I'm looking right now at my feet, which are near the hearth, twisted they're, a little bent to one side. Inside of left foot, outer of right, where they scrape the ground the skin's thick and cracked. In gone times I've felt such hunger, I'd break off lumps of the dry skin and chew it. Want to see? Okay watch, I am reaching down to my heel, feeling for horny edges, I'm sliding the thumbnail under. There, see this lump of skin, hard as a pebble, how easily it breaks off, mmm, chewy as a nut. Nowadays there's no shortage of food. I eat my feet for pleasure. ¹

The cruel hunger makes one destroy oneself. It is so unbearable that the biggest crime can be committed for the sake of it. Animal is such a person who has no home, no parents and no livelihood. Ma Franci, an old nun looks after. Animals distress, his helplessness, his terrible poverty can be seen in the fact that he and the dog Jara fed themselves on the leftover from a hotel. They fought over the daily scraps lying near the bins. Animal and Jara(dog) were rivals for food. The pathetic and unrelentful condition of animal can be seen in the fact that the dog has a name but Animal doesn't. But throughout the novel one never finds self-pity in Animal. He never pities himself but faced the difficulties and crosses the hurdles like a physically healthy person. Jara becomes his companion as they both share the food from the same source. He confesses, " In the days living on the street we were rivals for food. We used to work the same territory, the alleys behind the eating houses in the old city. We'd get there late evening when the waiters were tired and would sling the day's scraps at, rather than in, the bins" (17)

The insistent cry of the belly makes the situation vulnerable. The disastrous economic condition destroys mental, physical and spiritual peace. The battle for survival takes a toll and moral and spiritual aspects remain neglected, rather they cease to exist. The meek acceptance of the existing circumstances suggest anarchy and frustration. The economic insecurity is the root cause of the tragedies in the lives of individuals. Financial problems give rise to personal, social, religious, moral and psychological difficulties. Avoiding or solving one gives birth to another. Animal tells the eyes, “when I was starving I sold my blood to get food.” (24) Animal has never tasted a simple fruit like a pomegranate.

Animal meets Nisha, a social worker who introduces him to Zafar, a social activist. Nisha offers meal to Animal. Animal's happiness lies in the fact that he is going to relish the lunched by Nisha. He reveals, “Her cooking was good, her company fun.” (32). The kampani (company) ruined the health and lives of many, made them destitute and left them in the state of despair and destiny cursed them. They had no home, no land, no health and no occupation to survive. Physical hunger and mental starvation reduces them to mere beggars and animals.

Khaufpur, the city once had a high cultural life and a remarkable history, but the kampani disaster erased their past. Animal bluntly says that, “If it had not been the factory it would have been cholera, T.B., exhaustion, hunger.” (153) Hunger was a part of their daily life. Calamitous poverty, helplessness and ailments made life in Khaufpur impossible for many. Poverty and hunger goes hand in hand. With poverty comes hunger. People in Khaufpur are economically so poor that they cannot afford life saving drugs nor fruits. Animal hardly spends four rupees in a day. He pathetically portrays his lifestyle to Elli, doctresses who have come from America to help the people in distress. He says, “I can't even afford to stand you a coca cola. You know how much I spend in one day? Guess.” (175) Animal spends four rupees in a day. In spite of the dire poverty the Indians treat guest as God. They offer the guests their share of food and they remain hungry. When Elli goes to Huriya's place, an old lady who is a victim of the kampani offers her a glass of tea and a plate of roti with sugar and coriander leaf sprinkled on it.

Animal and Ma Franci stay together but are neither in the condition to help each other nor leave. Animal looks after Ma and shares his foodstuff. The utter poverty is reflected in the fact that they have no salt or chilli to add to the taste. He portrays the harsh reality, "It's not much, a bit of salt plus a little chilli would at least make the stomach glow, but we have neither." (64)

The impact of economic crisis lay heavy on their heads. Physical disability, economic poverty, deaths, destruction, deceit, political corruption spoiled their lives. People suffered because of industrial, economic and political crisis. Humanity survived through the thick and thin. People helped each other in whatever way possible. Dire poverty caused deaths. Due to lack of medical help and assistance, scarcity of food, pollution, environmental effects Animal's people suffered brutal consequences. Unity amongst the people is the only ray of hope. They help each other in the miserable condition. The novel portrays a character Zindabhai who runs a shop. He is called Zinda which means 'alive'. He survived when many succumbed to the effect of the poisonous gases released that night. Zinda helped the needy in whatever way he could. He helped Safiya, a casualty of the crisis. She had women's problem, had pain like she was losing a baby, the doctor told her to drink milk and eat fruit. Zinda helped her by giving some guavas as she could not even afford rotis. The economic condition of the people of Khaufpur is a curse for them. Some died of pain, some of hunger and others of the trauma. Rafi, a victim of the tragedy spent all he had on medicines, hardly did he spare ten rupees for food, but it did him no good.

Animal's People focuses the ruthless realities of life which are not only tragic, thorny but also acidic and unbearable. When Animal participates in the social activities and helps Zafar, he is given a job to keep a watch on the lawyers who come from America to settle the dispute. While keeping a watch Animal feels so hungry that he forgets the most important task. Hunger makes people forget everything on earth. Nothing is more important than the belly's cry. Animal is distracted from the purpose because of his hunger. "The aroma is very distraction. I swear I can smell kebabs. The demo and all of that fades into the background. So hungry I'm, my mouth is watering." (270)

Hunger, poverty, economic crisis, calamity both natural and man-made fall heavy on human life. *Animal's People* is a protest against industrialization. Indra Sinha lays the emphasis on the raw horrors that make the reader realise the effect of industrialization on the poor. The novel portrays the seething tension of life through which the people had to pass. Poverty and hunger debase humanity to an unfortunate level. The rich lose their conscience but the poor are shown with great humanity and dignity. *Animal's People* reminds one of Bhabani Bhattacharys's *So Many Hungers!* (1947), which portrays the historical fact of Bengal famine. In *So Many Hungers!* Bhattacharya portrays the horrors of famine. Jackals eat hungry people lying unconscious. Though public charity runs many free kitchens, thousands cannot be fed everyday. Many die of the excitement at the mere sight of food. Man and dog fight to get hold of rotten vegetables in the rubbish, as also found in *Animal's People*. Industrialization is a result of man's greed for wealth. *Animal's People* is a novel of compassion and indignation. It takes up the social realities of the contemporary life. The writer brings out the wonderful fighting spirit of man in the character of 'Animal'. The devilish profiteers, unscrupulous capitalists makes the lives of thousands miserable. The novel, thus copes with a multitude of complexities of modern life.

Works Cited:

Sinha, Indra. *Animal's People*. London: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd, 2007.

All Subsequent references are from this edition.

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