

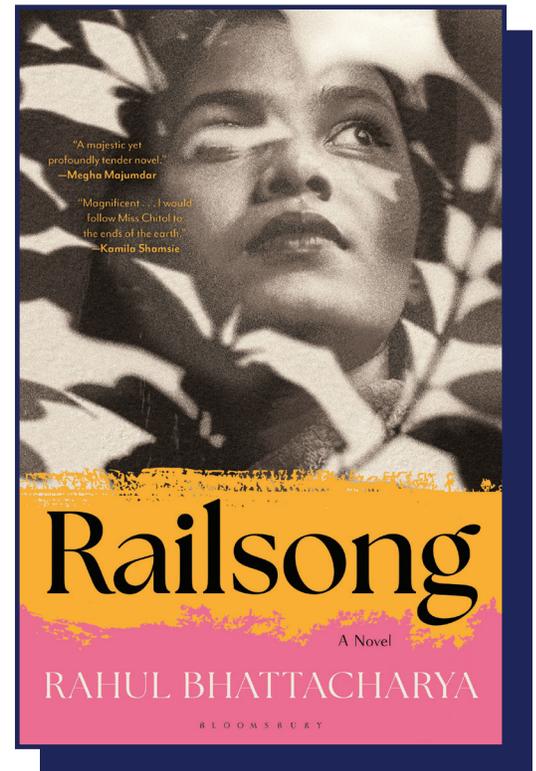


Railsong by Rahul Bhattacharya

Questions for Discussion

Please note: Some of these questions contain spoilers.

1. The novel opens with three-year-old Charu wanting to count people from a moving train. Why do you think Bhattacharya begins the book this way? How does this early impulse—to see and count—resonate differently once you’ve finished the novel?
2. Charu’s mother, Jigyasa, dies early in the book. How does the novel portray the impact of her death—not just emotionally, but in daily routines, household dynamics, and what’s expected of Charu as she grows up?
3. Surji is allowed to clean a soiled child but not feed a hungry one. What was your reaction to this detail? How does it establish the novel’s treatment of caste, care, and the unspoken rules that govern domestic life?
4. The famine chapter (“Aakaal”) marks a major shift in tone and scope. How does the novel change once hunger and scarcity become central? What does the famine reveal about the systems in place (governmental, familial, social) that are supposed to protect people?
5. Charu accompanies her father during famine relief work and witnesses suffering firsthand. How do these early experiences shape her understanding of adults, authority, and what safety actually means? What does she seem to absorb about who gets help and who doesn’t?
6. As Charu grows older, work becomes increasingly central to her sense of self. What does she seem to want from work that she cannot get from family or home life? How does this desire evolve—or get complicated—over the course of the novel?
7. Bombay appears as a place of opportunity, but also precarity, instability, and loss. How does the novel complicate the idea that leaving home automatically brings freedom? What does Charu gain and lose by moving to the city?



8. Charu is often competent, capable, and quick to learn, yet not fully accepted or secure in the spaces she occupies. Where do you see her abilities recognized, and where are they dismissed or constrained? How does gender shape these patterns? How does caste?
9. Women in the novel work constantly—in homes, offices, railway colonies, construction sites, and fields. What patterns do you notice in how women’s labor is valued, compensated, or made invisible across different settings and communities?
10. Indian Railways functions as both a workplace and a system that governs mobility, security, identity, and survival. How does the novel portray the railway as an institution? What does it provide, and what does it withhold?
11. The P branch chapters focus heavily on files, procedures, forms, and bureaucratic routine. How did you respond to these sections as a reader? Did they feel tedious, absorbing, revealing, or something else? Where do you see the author using comedy in them, and to what effect? What do they contribute to the novel’s larger project?
12. The 1974 railway strike is a major turning point in the novel. What does the strike reveal about competing loyalties to work, family, unions, and the state? How does Charu experience it differently than her father does?
13. The effects of the strike extend far beyond those who actively participate. How does the novel show the ripple effects of political action and state repression?
14. Charu’s work as a welfare inspector takes her across India to investigate claims, verify documents, and meet employees and their families. What do these fieldwork chapters reveal about the gap between policy and lived reality? How does this work change Charu’s understanding of the railway system and the people it’s supposed to serve?
15. The census section shows Charu attempting to count and categorize India’s population according to fixed definitions. What tensions does the novel explore between the bureaucratic need to count people and the complexity of their actual lives? What gets lost or flattened in official records?
16. Marriage in *Railsong* is portrayed more as accommodation than romance. How does the novel depict the gap between cultural ideals—like *pativrata* or sugar dissolving in milk—and the lived reality of adjustment, compromise, and loss of autonomy?
17. Charu’s romantic relationships unfold across years but do not resolve her story in conventional ways. What does she seem to learn from these relationships? What remains unresolved or unsettled by the novel’s end?

18. The novel tracks multiple welfare cases: missing persons, fraudulent certificates, multiple wives, contested family claims. What do these cases reveal about desperation, survival, and the ways people navigate or manipulate bureaucratic systems when they have no other options?
19. Religious and communal tensions surface throughout the novel—sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly. How does Bhattacharya portray the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s and early '90s? What effects does it have on everyday relationships, family dynamics, and institutional life?
20. By the end, Charu has left her marriage and is living independently in a hostel, traveling constantly for work. Did this ending feel like a liberation, loss, stalemate, or something else? What did you make of her final trajectory—and what do you think comes next?
21. The novel repeatedly returns to counting—people, jobs, vacancies, census figures, railway employees, communities. By the end of the book, what does “counting” seem to mean? Who gets counted in meaningful ways, and who remains invisible or miscounted in official records?
22. Looking back on the novel as a whole, how would you describe *Railsong*—as a story about endurance, adaptation, resistance, documentation, survival, or something else entirely? What moments, passages, or images most shaped your answer?