



Historical insight Explored in Githa Hariharan's in *Times of Siege*

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Abstract

Githa Hariharan has exposed the operations of power in families, society and the state through the thought provoking book In Times of Siege. Shiv simultaneously has to face allegations by a group of religious bigots regarding the article he has written on Basava, the medieval philosopher. Shiv Murthy's lesson 'module' on a twelfth-century poet and reformer named Basava, offends the political functionaries. Basava is portrayed as a rebel who fought against caste systems and worked to establish social equality. Thus the demand for curriculum revision by the Ithihass Suraksha Manch that sees Shiv Murthy's history module as blasphemous because it foregrounds the radical political actions of Basava. Githa Hariharan has given a historical insight to his predicament. History becomes alive once again and she portrays the same old problems that were prevalent ages ago was explored in this novel. She tries to portray that it is impossible for a simple, honest person to live on the same plane with prejudiced and biased religious bigots. She exposes the raw truths of self-destruction across various Indian social groupings. Despite its short length, the work contains a lot of thought-provoking material. There are many parallels throughout the work, and Meena acts as Shiv's spark. This study is an examination of the breakdown of secular ideals as represented in two contemporary texts that explore, from very different perspectives, the civil disorder and violence stemming from religious fundamentalism.

Keywords: political functionaries, catalyst, fundamentalist, nativism, religious bigotry, juxtaposition

Introduction

Githa Hariharan's skillful examination of the eternal struggle between religious fundamentalist ideas and liberal dissent in modern India begins and ends with History. She has exposed the operations of power in families, society and the state through the thought provoking book *In Times of Siege*. This novel is about the life of Shiv Murthy, a fifty two year old Professor of History at Kasturba Gandhi Central University and Meena an out spoken young woman with a broken knee, who comes into his life and turns it upside down. Murthy enters suddenly into the political world because of Meena and he fails to remember who and what he is. The violence and

unease feeling seems distant and unreal. In addition, it's enticingly true to life in that neither Meena nor Murthy's relationship nor the proper way to recall history can be resolved with simple, triumphant solutions. Through this novel she has proved that she is a good novelist and a better activist.

In *Times of Siege* dramatizes the reactionary nativism of Hindu religious ideologues who seek the revision of Indian history textbooks to project an image of an India that has always been gloriously, and homogenously, Hindu. Shiv Murthy is under the fire for devising the controversial history course module on Basava puts it, "their imagination works overtime concocting febrile memories: horse drawn



chariots thousands of years before their invention. Hymns packed with occult allusions to high energy physics... All part of a hoary, unashamedly olden past. A past past-er than anybody else's, so how can it not be the cradle of all civilization?" (ITS 97)

The revisionary project of these right wing intellectuals is at the same time intolerant of difference that belies that incredible vitality of indigenous philosophical and religious movements that have been reformist in bent. Basava's radical questioning of caste divisions in his establishment of a utopian community in which all people, genders and classes are welcome is resolutely ignored by varnishing the uncomfortable aspects of his life that do not fit into the picture of saintliness. Thus the demand for curriculum revision by the Ithihas Suraksha Manch that sees Shiv Murthy's history module as blasphemous because it foregrounds the radical political actions of Basava.

Shiv simultaneously has to face allegations by a group of religious bigots regarding the article he has written on Basava, the medieval philosopher. The extremists from 'Ithias Suraksha Manch' voice their brash opinions about Shiv's 'academic rape' of a religious subject. He is totally dominated by his wife Rekha but she is far away and he finds himself discussing things with Meena, a chit fo a girl, who is by circumstances staying at his premises because of her broken leg. He somehow picks up courage and makes some tough decisions. He is caught in a maze and wonders whether he should stick to his guns as far as his decisions are concerned or he should get himself caught up in the rigmarole of religious intolerance and apologise for what he has written. This is the crux of the issue in the novel that portrays religious fundamentalism in India and other places. Of course, this is a satire on liberalism in the West. There is an eternal battle between religious bigotry and tolerance in him.

Shiv becomes a victim of circumstances and has to make some extremely difficult decisions. His lesson on "Basavanna's movement for social reform has been leaked somehow to the press" (ITS 53). He learns the bitter lesson that though he has honestly written a lesson, he, instead of being appreciated, has been informed that "...the lesson has hurt the sentiments of a Hindu watchdog group" (ITS 53). He

has been accused of distorting history and historical figures. It sounds stupid to him when the Head tells him:

"It seems you have implied Basavanna's city, Kalyana, was not a model Hindu kingdom. It seems you have exaggerated the problem of caste and written in a very biased way about the Brahmins and temple priests. And also you have not made it clear enough that Basavanna was much more than an ordinary human being. There are people who consider him divine you know. "(ITS 53-54)

Shiv Murthy's lesson 'module' on a twelfth-century poet and reformer named Basava, offends the political functionaries. Basava is portrayed as a rebel who fought against caste systems and worked to establish social equality. The so-called Ithihas Suraksha Manch (History Protection Forum), a "Hindu watch-dog group" (ITS 55) claims that the lesson "distorts history" because it undermines Basava's reputation as a mystic poet and "makes too much of caste divisions among Hindus" (ITS 57). Pressured to apologize or withdraw his piece by the university's administrative powers (his department's Head and the Dean), Murthy gradually emerges as an advocate of tolerant secularism, a reluctant hero who stands up for academic freedom and professionalism.

Shiv's lesson deals with Veerasaiva movement that was egalitarian and challenging to the caste system and the King Bijjala. A proposed marriage between a Brahmin bride and a bridegroom of cobbler led to unrest, punishment of the fathers of the couple and the bridegroom himself, revolt, the elimination of the King and finally the mysterious death of Basavanna himself. Later on Veerasaivism was slowly absorbed by tradition but the legacy of rebellion remained. Shiv ruminates over the broken dream of Basavanna for equality and freedom but at sea regarding how to convey those moorings to the communalists while Meena is obsessed with Said and Asterix and his wife Rekha with her instinct for self-preservation. There's a conflict in Shiv—one part wants headlong confrontation with the department and the other an academic shy of activism, the peaceful dream of editing of Amita's module, pleasant watching of the TV along with the TV.



Shiv cannot believe his ears when he is told that he has to go on leave because of the controversy. He is pained when the Head tells him that he will have to tender an apology and let the Head decide to reprint the lesson. He is in a quandary whether he should stand up for his writings or succumb to religious tolerance and tender an apology much against his wishes. We learn about “fundoos” (ITS 57) from Meena’s conversation with Shiv. And these fundamentalists are “Fascist. Obscurantist. Terrorists. And the made-in-India brand, the communalist—a deceptively innocuous sounding name for professional other-community haters” (ITS 57). Shiv takes inspiration from Basava and his vacillating memories of his deceased father. He feels akin to them in the sense that they also faced so many accusations in their times like him. Basavanna, a saint of the medieval age, was a revolutionary who overhauled the caste system and overthrew it during the reign of Kalyana. Shiv’s own father was a revolutionary and part and parcel of the Indian freedom movement.

In *Times of Siege* can be viewed as post-Godhra/post-Gujarat texts that are deeply imbued with a political and ethical consciousness shaped by righteous indignation against the unprecedented degree of violence against minority communities in India that is sponsored by the state, as opposed to the previously tolerated by it. This study looks at how secular ideals are breaking down as depicted in two modern books that examine the violence and civic unrest caused by religious extremism from very different angles.

Githa Hariharan herself says in an interview with Rosemary Sorensen that myths are being distorted and certain people are using them as instruments of fundamentalism, proposing to reinterpret them from the point of view of our times and life:

“The cowardly way is to say, well all of this is obscurantist ... The other way is to constantly reinterpret. A myth only grows alive when you reinterpret, when you see it from the point of view of your life, of your times” (45).

She admires his works ‘owing to their poetically capricious style and the way in which he is always sticking his neck out’. Vasudha Narayanan, in the book *Feminism and World Religions*, analyses the

images of women in the Hindu tradition, reinforces the idea that myths can be manipulated by those who are in powerful positions. Narayanan’s chapter becomes essential in understanding the manipulation of mythological texts by male Brahmins. Narayanan argues that it was the British who wanted to ‘create’ a coherent set of legal tools for India, and therefore employed male Brahmins to translate what they believed to be important scriptures.

Githa Hariharan has given a historical insight to his predicament. History becomes alive once again and she portrays the same old problems that were prevalent ages ago:

“Basava and many of his followers took on the caste system, the iron net that held society so firmly in place; that reduce the common man and woman to hopeless captives. Thousands of these ‘ordinary’ men and women took part in Basava’s egalitarian dream... The king, Bijjala, an old friend of Basava’s, was under tremendous pressure from the pillars of society. Not surprisingly, the relationship between the king and his finance minister soured”. (ITS 61)

The Vice-Chancellor wants to get away from any kind of controversy and urges Shiv to take back his words and retract. He wants him to apologize to the ‘Ithihas Suraksha Manch’ and avoid the media. He sees his lesson sent to the corner in disgrace and imagines it to be placed in quarantine like chemicals in a highly inflammable vehicle: “Caution Highly Inflammable Medieval history. Shiv’s booklets have been banished along with the real and troublesome Basava. Only a sanitised Basava is allowed to remain, a ‘saint singer’, a singer with a saintly face”. (ITS 86)

Shiv comes to know that he is going to be asked to resign to appease the mob rage. His books containing his lesson have been relegated to a corner due to mob censorship. As a historian he was expected to present sanitized Basavanna sans the caste element and project him as a demi-god rather than a revolutionary. Here Githa Hariharan writes about the disentanglement of myth and history as:

“Separating history and myth, pulling apart history and legend. Deciding which chunks of history will keep the myth earthbound; which slivers of myth will cast light, and insight, on dull historical fragments. The two have to be torn apart, their limbs



disentangled, to see who is who; then coaxed into embrace again to understand the composite reality; Approaching the whole, the heterogeneous truth that demands the coupling of conflicting narratives, requires the participation of mere one body“(ITS 87).

For the detractors, “Basava was nothing more than bigoted revolutionary”(ITS 87). Githa Hariharan’s angst is over the betrayal of the secularist vision that gave shape to India, and the limited scope for debate in the nation and happy co-existence of all cultures. She makes an avid discovery and puts forward her views. It is a juxtaposition of three ages from the past with the present rise of the ‘fundoo’s (fundamentalists). In kalia in the twelfth century the Veerashaiva movement tried to bring about social change and tried to do away with the narrow rigid caste prejudices and gender bias. In the sixtieth century Vijayanagar was sacked. Shiv tries to gauge the heritage lessons to come to some kind of conclusion. He is no longer in a quandary about facing the public or the media. He himself amazed at his capacity to take up the cause against repression. He tells the media the fact:

“The important thing to remember,” he says, “is that history, like the human mind, is a complex body with many strands. Ours is a rich, plural history. Of course all these threads must be repeatedly re-examined”. (ITS 97)

Githa Hariharan tries to portray the link between fascism and the ugly faces of Hindutava unveiling themselves all around, and it is “the regimentation of thought and the brutal repression of culture”(ITS 107). She makes us sit and think, “Each of us carries within ourselves a history, an encyclopedia of images, a landscape with its distinct patterns of mutilation”(ITS 104). Githa Hariharan, through Shiv, portrays as:

“Truth, that large map of abstraction so many men fight over, die for, is the size of a pinpoint—just a glimmer in a drop of water, part of the flowing stream. And what is the truth Basava sees in the river? That cross-current can co-exist, that rapids and the most placid of waters are fellow travelers? Or that it is possible to move, to break free of gold encrusted temples, customs and prejudices made of petrified stone, aspiring to stand like monuments for all times?”(ITS 107)

Shiv tells Meena, about Basava’s rosy myths and the so-called divine powers. The story goes that Basava was Siva’s bull that was sent on earth. Peculiar examples of Basava’s miracles by a bigwig were that “Basava was praying when he saw an ant hurrying along with a seed in its mouth. Basava took this seed for some reason and gave it to his sister Nagamma, and the result was an immaculate conception”(ITS 116-117). As with history, the use of myth and legend in any creative activity becomes very difficult if the guideline is to be as exclusive as possible.

Using this large and rich body of tradition for various forms of cultural expression is as old as culture itself in India. Although Hindu-Muslim riots have a long and complex genealogy in India rooted in British colonial policies, the conflicting strands of the Indian nationalist movement, and more particularly in the division of the country at the time of Independence in 1947, they have been, regrettably, an even more recurrent feature of post independence India.

Ultimately Shiv’s father is no longer his ideal and he “leaves with the storm”(ITS 191). His father’s legacy to Shiv is “the gift of remembrance”(ITS 193). Shiv is now ready to “leap off the precipice”(ITS 194). Githa Hariharan’s voice can be heard as Shiv reaffirms “...the value of the only heirloom he needs from the past, the right to know a thing in all the ways possible”(ITS 194).

Githa Hariharan tries to portray that it is impossible for a simple, honest person to live on the same plane with prejudiced and biased religious bigots. She exposes the raw truths of self-destruction across various Indian social groupings. They may be incredibly cruel and polarising. Today people are the vortex of volcanic violence. A message is important for the world that censorship is fatal when facts are hidden. Religious fundamentalists all over the globe have been responsible for the horrific destruction of the world. Though she has written about Hindu fundamentalists, it applies to every kind of fanatic and fundamental following of any religion. Anyone can identify with the characters in the novel and relate with them. Despite its short length, the work contains a lot of thought-provoking material. There are many parallels throughout the work, and Meena acts as Shiv’s spark.



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