

Excavation of Myths and Politicizing Communal History in Geetha Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*

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Abstract – Geetha Hariharan, along with Anita Nair, Manju Kapoor, Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya, contributes a major part in the contemporary Indian literature written in English. She has written novels, short stories and essays over the last three decades. Hariharan made debut in the literary arena with the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* which won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book in 1993. Her other famous novels are *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, *When Dreams Travel* and *Fugitive Histories*. Her latest novel is *I Have Become the Tide*. Hariharan is a social activist trying to change the laws related to the injustice of women. In 1995, Hariharan made a landmark in Indian history by challenging the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act as discriminatory against women. In *Times of Siege* was her fourth novel published in 2003. The novel revolves around a number of myths and historical events. It is a typical novel that discusses plainly the growing influence of the ideology of Hinduism in India.

Keywords: - Politics, Myths, Fundamentalists, Campus Politics, Rewriting History etc.

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Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* is based on a real historical event. In 1986, a Karnataka based writer H.S. Shivaprakash wrote a play namely *Mahachaitra* (*The Great Spring*) on Basavanna, the 12th century saint and social reformer. In this play, he narrates the struggles of Basavanna for the city of Kalyana. The play was so popular in Kannada literature that it was prescribed as textbook in three major universities of Karnataka. Nearly after a decade, in 1995, when the play was prescribed as a text in Gulbarga University it caused a communal controversy. A Hindu religious group Shri Shri Jagadguru Mate Mahadevi accused the work for portraying Basavanna in poor light (or in an unflattering manner). The group urged the Karnataka Government to ban the play. This incident led to a legal battle and the play was eventually withdrawn from the university syllabus. This incident paved the way to form the background of Hariharan's present novel.

In Times of Siege tells the story of Shiv Murthy, a 52 years old Professor of History in an Open University in New Delhi. Murthy does not take regular classes but provides study material to his correspondence students. When the novel starts, we find that his wife Rekha is staying at U.S.A. to look after their only daughter Tara. In the meantime, Meena, daughter of Shiv's childhood friend Sumathi, suffers from a knee injury due to slipping from a bus. Shiv, being her local guardian gets a call from her hostel to pick her up and keep her in his house for few days so that she can recover from her injury. Meena, a sociology student and research scholar in Kamala Nehru University, is writing a thesis on the women who were affected by anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. Meena is an intelligent and practical girl and Shiv's room gets a new political look with her presence.

Meanwhile, Shiv is caught up in a controversy over his module on 12th century poet and social reformer Basava. The module hurts the sentiments of a Hindu watchdog group 'Itihas Suraksha Manch' which accuses Shiv that he has intentionally distorted Indian medieval history as it undermines Basava's reputation as a mystic poet and makes too much of caste divisions among Hindus. The Itihas Suraksha Manch explains the reasons of controversy:

It seems you have implied that 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. (53-54)

The so called manch also demands an apology from Shiv's side for this blunder. It really surprises Shiv that he has written the said module for the B.A. History students five years ago, and after such a long time, a group makes allegation for hurting the sentiments of the Hindus. This clearly shows the growing influence of fundamentalism in the society at that time.

Shiv realizes that the problem is not limited to his portrayal of Basava; it is actually about not showing the glorification of Hinduism while writing about the life and times of Basava. As he explains Meena that:

They are objecting to the fact that I have not made the heroes heroic enough, and that I have made the villains too villainous. At any rate, they claim the lesson *distorts* history ... It seems I have not sung enough of a paeon to the glory of Hindu kingdoms; and that I make too much of caste divisions among Hindus. (55)

His observation comes true when the controversy affects the Hindu- Muslim relations, reverberating echoes of the Ayodhya controversy and the Babri Masjid demolition as a result of religious fundamentalism.

When Shiv hears the name of the organization behind the controversy, he finds it very strange, "the Itihas Suraksha Manch. The protection of history! Whoever heard of history having to be protected?" (55). Meena, after hearing this, satires that the word 'protection' is used these days to imply 'attack'. Shiv also seems agree with Meena when he says, "... it is true that whether people are talking about culture or history or women's rights, protection has become a much-abused word. A cover-up for all kinds of bullying tactics" (55). Shiv's words show that what he means is the general condition of anarchy prevailing in all aspects of life.

It is in a meeting with the head and the dean that Shiv gets to know the reasons for the controversy. The head informs him that it is not the text but its implications which are problematic, and goes on to read out a long list of "what he likes to call ambiguous statements, as if the word ambiguous contains magic that automatically turns fact to falsehood" (69). Shiv is exasperated at this intrusion into his territory as a historian. He clarifies that, "all this is part of history, drawn from a variety of sources... Part of the challenge of getting to know Basava's life and times is reconstructing it out of literary texts, legends, inscriptions and other records" (68).

Shiv brings out the problem of validity of historical and hagiographical sources. This applies to the Ayodhya dispute as well, where history mingles with myths and legends. Fundamentalist forces want to use history to their advantage. Basically, to fundamentalists it is not the historicity of facts that matters, but their suitability to their sectarian aims in the present. So, they denounce "any image of the past that does not conform to current theology" (Siege 156). Fundamentalist forces want to mould history to match their purpose of either glorification or detestation of a community, to nurture narrow communal identities. This practice is widespread in contemporary India, with its heterogeneous demography. It is such an atmosphere of divisive politics that Hariharan depicts in the novel, where self-owned protectors of history, like the Itihas Suraksha Manch, flourish. The impudence of the Manch in the novel is exhibited in their demands:

The first is an apology for hurting their sentiments. They want separate apologies from Dr Murthy and from the department, by extension the university. Second, the lesson should be retracted and the material recalled from all students registered for the course, and from study centres and libraries. Third, the rewritten lesson should be submitted to the Manch before it is sent to our printing unit. (69)

These demands of the Manch deprive the historian of any authority over his work. The last one, especially, shows the Manch's desire to gain supremacy over the historian, though there is no proof of its own credibility. Even the dean finds the third demand contemptible and the head agrees with him. But Shiv finds the head unreliable; he is due to retire and would want to avoid controversy if he wants an extension. Through such a description, Hariharan exposes the dark side of the academic scholars putting at stake their scholarship for little benefits like promotions or extensions. But not everybody can be put in this category. Shiv puts his foot down and refuses to bend under pressure which shocks both the dean and the head. Shiv clears his intentions behind writing the lesson, "The lesson does not distort history by any stretch of the imagination. And I will not apologize or explain myself to a group outside the university, a group of people we do not recognize as historian" (70). It is this incident where begins the battle of ideologies; at one side, there is Shiv who is inspired by his father and Meena and her comrades; and on the other side, there is the Itihas Suraksha Manch with a number of fundamentalists, and the university authorities which have succumbed to pressure into doing as directed by the Manch. The rest of the novel depicts how Shiv copes up with this controversy and the events following it.

The post-demolition times in which Shiv lives offer a scenario in which the socio-political equations in the country have changed considerably. People have become more sensitive to issues of

communalism and respond mindlessly to the call of fanatics who have come in the forefront of Indian politics because of the boost they received after they succeeded in razing down the Babri Masjid. Their selfish-interest in the vote-bank politics once served, now they look for newer territories of conflict and controversy, even if remotely related with their religion or community. And this group of hate-mongers does not hesitate in using violent means, and making a mountain out of a molehill to catch the public eye.

To sum up, Grrtha Hariharan in her novel *In Times of Siege* presents some burning issue of contemporary time by using various myths and historical truths. What Hariharan wants to show is that Indian people are very sensitive towards their religion. They react unexpectedly if anyone tries to hurt their faith. The same happens with Shiv, the central character of the novel, who unknowingly hurts the sentiments of some Hindu fundamentalists and faces many hardships to tackle the problem. The novel also presents the issue related to the demolition of Babri Masjid.

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