

## Politics of Meteoric Rise of Fundamentalism and its Repercussions in Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*

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### Abstract:

This paper attempts to analyse the disastrous consequences of intolerance and aggressiveness of fundamentalists and foul face of fundamentalism in Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* (2003). The essential topic in this novel is the growth of fanaticism in academic circles. Githa Hariharan has illustrated how the world of academia is under siege by fundamentalist forces, which aim to silence the voice of an academician Prof. Shiv, employed at an open university. His curriculum on mediaeval history - a twelfth century saint-poet-politician-cum-social reformer Basava - raises a commotion. The dispute gets pace followed by threats, and violence. However, the situation ends up amidst protests and counterprotests imposing a check on the tide of extremism. She has indirectly implied that there is no scope for the fundamentalist forces in academic dialogue as these forces resort to coercive methods and violence while trying to suppress the voices of normal and competent individuals.

**Keywords:** Academician, Fundamentalism, Fundamentalists, Society, Politics

Githa Hariharan belongs to the new generation of Indian writers who have elevated Indian English Literature's prominence and readership. She has acknowledged her capacity for juggling multiple jobs, including that of wife, mother, writer, activist, and social worker. Apparently, she chose a tiny space for nearly all of her works but strives to broaden it to the point where it becomes an extensive exposition of the human condition.

Githa Hariharan's fiction is heavily influenced by her connection with history. *In Times of Siege* confronts fundamentalism's nasty face and the ugliness of communal rioting, respectively. Her concern for free speech, particularly among secular artists, writers, academics, and intellectuals, is central to her fourth novel, *In Times of Siege*. It might be considered the sociology of

contemporary India. According to Anita Singh, the novel discusses the dangers associated with being a liberal in contemporary society. It is exceedingly contradictory that globalisation encroaches on the writer's area.

"Fundamentalists curb even an academician's freedom of thought and expression," ("Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*: A Symbolic Declaration of Human Rights," 199).

*In Times of Siege* is primarily concerned with the topic of academics being silenced by a fundamentalist organisation that enjoys the implicit support of the government's powers that be. The novel is set in New Delhi, where a history professor at KG Central University becomes the centre of attention due to a scandal surrounding one of his mediaeval history modules. His module on the twelfth-century saint-poet-reformer-

politician Basava is deceptively hijacked by an ultra-Hindu movement dubbed Itihas Suraksha Manch. Due to the University's distance education programme, the purported module is inexplicably leaked to the press, despite the fact that the scoundrel responsible is never addressed or disclosed in the novel. However, one who has read between the lines is easy able to deduce Dr. Arya's involvement in this filthy game. The qualifications of Dr. Arya are very well-known: he is an RSS activist and a fundamentalist.

Clearly, *In Times of Siege* addresses a contemporary issue: the politics of caste divide, intolerance, and the aggression of fundamentalist Hindu organisations. The 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid also serves as a backdrop, highlighting the stratospheric ascent of communal intolerance. The novel depicts the common guy in this milieu - a history professor at an Open University who is accidentally dragged into political turmoil and forced to defend himself by counter-aggression.

Indeed, the novel, *In Times of Siege*, emphasises the fundamentalists' hostility and violence toward liberal forces. The novel's specific background indicates that the voice and opinion of a liberal professor, Professor Shiv, are under virtual siege by the extremist Hindu organisation Itihas Suraksha Manch. The novel's fundamental theme is introduced in the fourth chapter, when Professor Shiv receives a call from a magazine correspondent inquiring about his article/lesson in the B.A. history module. It is expected that he is looking for an evident connection between Shiv's leave and the article protests. He recounts Shiv: "It's an article on the twelfth century poet and social reformer Basavanna. And you have yourself confirmed that you are on leave. Are you denying that you went on leave because of the protests against your article; Sir?" (51)

It is vital to describe the facts surrounding Shiv's application for leave from the department. He does so solely to dedicate additional time and attention to Meena, who is confined to this apartment. She is a college student who had a leg injury while attempting to board a bus. One of her legs is in a cast.

The novel, *In Times of Siege*, focuses on how a woman, Meena, a sociology student, is extremely courageous in her attitude to "fundoos." Githa Hariharan portrays her female protagonist, Meena, as someone who is torn between two worlds but is adamant about adhering to her modern values. In "Beyond Aitch(Indus)es and Em(uslim)s," Rajender Kaur certifies that Githa Hariharan is a valid "polemical novelist" (50).

Shiv's academic obligations expand in magnitude because he is in charge of B.A.

history. As a result, he must work under the administrative pressure of his Head of Department, exercising extra vigilance before approving or okaying a lesson. The Head is always in favour of a 'consensus approach' and is always prepared to avoid any dispute that may arise from expert-authored papers. As a result, he is extremely circumspect about course specialists who may be overly divisive, dominant, or prone to extreme opinions. Indeed, the true danger now confronts Shiv: the recorded lectures, i.e., those included in printed pamphlets. After abruptly refusing to grant even a brief interview or make any comments about the controversy surrounding his Basava class, Shiv informs Meena, who is eager to learn about the subject of the interview. However, Meena is more circumspect and sensible when she makes an astute and pointed inference about Dr. Arya's involvement in this heinous tragedy. Furthermore, Shiv's suspicions about the true nature of the crisis are confirmed when he receives a call from his Head of Department, Dr. Sharma, who informs him

that “there is a problem with our mediaeval Indian history lessons” (53). Dr. Sharma continues by informing Shiv that his lesson on Basavanna’s social reform has been leaked to the press.

The Head continues to expound on how the debate deteriorated into a crisis with unfavourable implications. Both the Head and Dean received an enraged and hostile letter regarding this lesson. Shiv is accused by a group named Itihas Suraksha Manch of misrepresenting history and historical personalities. This is how the Head describes his attitude toward the contentious business:

It seems you have implied that Basavanna’s city, Kalyana, was not a model of 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. (53-54)

Unsurprisingly, the Head’s arguments, which conclude with the phrase “It seems,” portray him as a person of little or no value, a man of feeble will or resolve who is subject to the smallest attack and lacking the strength to defend his academic colleague. His words exemplify how quickly he is or may be intimidated by adverse situations/circumstances. He exhibits neither remorse or embarrassment in accusing his own colleague of anti-Brahmin, anti-temple bias, and a deliberate attempt to discredit a revered and deified historical figure such as Basava. Additionally, it draws attention to history’s subtle workings, shining light on the ways in which the past or antiquity bestows sanctity on some places, things, persons, and events regardless of their fundamental worth and merit. Besides, the Head says Shiv that

“there is a rumour that you have gone on leave because the lesson has got into trouble” (54).

Although Shiv discerns an insane logic in the immediate web that is being formed around him, the Head, instead of agreeing with Shiv - let alone taking a humanitarian and sympathetic stance on the problem - provides a defensive strategy proposal to Shiv. Meena can detect the rat faster than Professor Shiv Murthy. She nails the nail on the head with her unique style, cutting straight to the heart of the matter: “It’s Arya, isn’t it?” (55). Shiv, for his part, is unable to suppress the small storm of anger brewing in his mind, and his response is drenched in rage and irony.

Githa Hariharan criticises the communal bias inherent in the writing of history, particularly when it becomes a toy in the hands of fundamentalists bent on imposing a distinct, parochial, and monopolised interpretation of history on everybody. Shiv is threatened when Meena instils courage in him by stating that he cannot apologise or adjust the lesson. He senses his eloquence about the complexity of history dwindling with the prospect of confronting fists, threats, or any form of physical harm. Later in the novel, he asks himself “is it possible to write history - or anything at all - if you have to worry about your masters, objections, their venal sentiments” (157).

To Shiv’s chagrin and consternation, the Head, a timid person, says that Shiv should have focused exclusively on the facts relevant to the lesson. Prof. Sharma says that these two truths are that Kalyana was a beautiful Hindu kingdom and that Basava taught people the value of elevating untouchables. However, this suggestion certainly reeks of insufficient compliance with the supposed Manch’s pressure method. Clearly, *In Times of Siege* is a novel about ideas, since Gita Hariharan discusses a new type of

ensorship that progressive historians encountered during that time period.

Unconsciously, Shiv becomes the focus of a fundamentalist attack that manifests as protest letters, hate mails, and then as open violence in which his room, along with all of its furniture and books, is ruthlessly ransacked in the University department. Ironically, the claimed lecture on Basava is one of the few he has prepared during his teaching career that is motivated by real enthusiasm and historical inquiry.

Shiv Murthy, a devout student of Basava, has been torn for a long period of time between himself. He reflects when he grasps the weight of the circumstance and the intensity of the controversy. He is not confident in himself: "He is an academic, he argues, not some rabble-rousing activist. He is a professor, after all, not a two-inch newspaper-column hero" (64). However, this vacillation eventually gives way to a determined resolve to adhere to his dedication to historical realities.

Shiv is now about to enter the initial circle of the vortex being spun around him by the fanatics. He needs to speak with the Dean and the Head of the History Department about the problem, which is why the Dean summoned Shiv to his office. A retrospective examination of Shiv's meeting with the dean and head may shed light on the rapid growth of the controversy surrounding his Basava lesson. Shiv sits in the Dean's chamber chair, convinced that he is in a defendant's dock. The head sits beside Shiv's chair, across from the dean, and appears to shrink away from Shiv. His eyes cast a fleeting malicious glimpse at Shiv's features before averting their gaze. This demonstrates how even top academics desire to save their own skin when a colleague faces a problem or issue. Shiv, on the other hand, throws away the head's disinterest and selfishness and makes a sincere defence of himself.

Shiv, predictably, refuses to submit to the Hindu fascists' schemes. Shiv is aided in his fight against intellectual suppression by students as well, despite the fact that the University campus remains vacant. Shiv now possesses the armour, ardour, and enthusiasm of a warrior, courtesy of Meena and her companions at the University. Meena's companions, particularly Amar and Jyoti, are remarkable in multiple ways. They plan a protest march against the Manch's fascist tactics, and much to Shiv's surprise, the rally is a big success, garnering widespread press coverage. This gathering also contributes to the resolution of the Manch's and its activists' dilemma of menace. Shiv becomes a superstar despite his controversy, and his small lesson on Basava grows into an epic. And he is lucky to have the trust and support of his colleagues, particularly Amita and Menon, who join him to a location outside the university campus to devise a strategy for countering the Manch's onslaught. The faculty meeting in the department fails to produce any constructive direction or resolution. It ends on a pretty unpleasant note, with Arya pouncing on Shiv's neck and openly mouthing his poison. Even before this heinous act occurs, Shiv is aware of Arya's role in the heinous Manch game.

Thus, the department's meeting becomes involved in accusations and counterallegations, ultimately leading to nowhere. However, the heinous incident staged by Arya serves as the finale, showing his radical, impure, and aggressive behaviour. Shiv is taken off guard by Arya, who seizes his throat: "Arya has punched on him and has him by the collar ... Arya round his waist, pulling him back" (127). This demonstrates the extent to which intellectuals like Arya have succumbed to moral decay. As a low achiever academically, he attempts to compensate by connecting himself with fundamentalist movements.

Not only does *In Times of Siege* bring fundamentalism and intellectual restriction to the forefront, but it also offers a critique of the academic world. The Head and Dean are indecisive, weak, pragmatic, and successful academicians. They are always willing to make concessions when confronted with a crisis. They operate in a seamless, 'play it safe' manner. Vicechancellors provide humorous relief. He is pretty entertaining in the way he twists and bends the questions posed to him by the media. He is evasive and speaks incessantly without actually saying anything.

Thus, the story raises numerous crucial questions about individual liberty in India. Shiv's remembrance of his father, a freedom soldier who vanished into obscurity, casts doubt on the meaning and importance of India's 1947 victory for independence. "What kind of country poisons the minds of children, of its youth? And did we fight for freedom so we could divide this teeming, hungry house forever?" (159-60).

As the tension precipitated by the debate begins to subside, Shiv encounters a hilarious interlude to the entire situation. This is the Vice-Chancellor's letter to him, implying that Shiv should be objective in his academic studies but also advising him to adhere to public opinion. The letter conveys: "Everything we write and teach should illustrate, without leaving room for doubt and ambiguity, that we are one country. Above all, nothing we say or write should have divisive consequences" (185).

Shiv is perplexed because the letter contains not a single word about the 'unfortunate situation.' The raid on Shiv's room is unmistakably a postscript, a by-product of contentious effects. What matters - aside from the terrible incident in the background - is still original sin. That his lesson, his remarks, drew an unwelcome spotlight, the flamboyant hues

of scandal, controversy, and 'politics' into the university.

Thus, *In Times of Siege* puts to light issues of fundamentalism, intellectual restriction, and university administrators' opportunism. It is not just Shiv in the novel who is needed to come out and declare their demand for these basic liberties; even the mildest form of tolerance for any form of racism or chauvinism will bite you like a cobra in the pitcher if you put your hand in. Additionally, the novel might be viewed as a frank reflection on the academic method and its goals. Gita Hariharan informs the reader that she purposefully set the story in a university to underline that the process of learning is supposed to tear down barriers and widen the students' world, rather than contract it via the instilling of preconceptions. "If a free and frank debate is discouraged in a university set up" ("New Voices, New Challenges," 382), this shows the insidious role of communal forces.

In *In Times of Siege*, Githa Hariharan demonstrates how extremists target even academics for their embrace of contemporary philosophy. It is not just a battle of traditionalists and modernists; it is also a clash of academics and politicians. As long as people continue to adhere to mythology and superstitious ideas, these kinds of confrontations will inevitably occur. The novel depicts the conflict between history and politics, as well as politics and history.

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