

## Of Religion and Politics in Modern India: A Reading of Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*

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### ABSTRACT

“If there was ever a time when writers could refuge from politics in the world of imagination, then that time has long past”, says Bill Ashcroft, “The world is richer and yet more people are poorer than any time in history. Neither writing nor criticism can avoid the call to justice forced on the world by the mushrooming of neo-liberal political and economic power”<sup>1</sup>. Today our society faces tremendous problem under the influence of politics and power, which makes the innocent people its ladder to climb and to have the ripe fruit of development, and this issue directly or indirectly pepped out in the writings of the contemporary writers too. All the writers, committed with the consciousness of the society, naturally responds to a world that seems to be “falling apart” in the wake of the brutal advance of capitalism, rampant individualism, religion conflicts and the destruction of liberal traditions of hope and faith in man’s innate goodness and consequent loss of community. This paper makes a humble attempt to discuss that how the rise of religious fundamentalism and extremism, in diverse forms, represent major threats for academia freedom as well as for civil society with well acclaimed modern day novelist Githa Hariharan’s novel *In Times of Siege* (2004). The novel is a mirror to Indian society, which is increasingly marked by the rise of fundamentalism, communal violence, social injustice, mistrust, hate, and censorship.

**Keywords:** Individualism, Fundamentalism, censorship, communal violence, politics.

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Among the new generation of Indian novelists, Githa Hariharan is a name to refer with particularly in the context of post-colonial Indian writing. Hariharan has always believed that political altitudes must come through in the writing and that a good writer is not someone who is making something perfect, but someone who can meet the challenges of the times. Her artistic opus of *In Times of Siege* displays not merely her creative erudition, but also a firm commitment to humanitarian tolerance, democracy, pluralism, secularism and a concern with the history of India.

The religious 'fundamentalist' movements emerging in connection with politics in contemporary history, especially from the 1980s onward, can be seen as replay of fascism in the broad sense. Religion in pre-colonial, pre-modern society was naturally different from religion in the modern era, when separation between the spiritual and secular, between politics and religion, was promoted. Throughout history and in every tradition, wars have been fought on the grounds of religion, for the protection of its codes and ideals. Paul Kurtz in his examination of *The Growth of Worldwide Fundamentalism* writes, "fundamentalism is a religious phenomenon, a political movement and a state of consciousness. It is characterized by profound dissatisfaction about the state of society and a strong preoccupation with fundamental religious beliefs fundamentalism should refer to any group or attitude that stresses strict and literal adherence to a set of fundamental principles or values"<sup>7</sup>. One can hardly read a newspaper or watch the news without some reference to Fundamentalism. In this paper, I will discuss how the rise of religious fundamentalism and extremism, in diverse forms, represent major threats for academia freedom as well as for modern secular India. Through this novel Hariharan also elevates the importance of Basava Movement in the history of the medieval India through the character of Shiv Murthy, the central character of the novel.

The novel is set in the academic, literary circles of Delhi to which Hariharan herself is quite similar and in a way associated with Professor Shiv Murthy. Shiv Murthy is a fifty-two year old Professor of History at the fictional Open University in Delhi, "who no longer teaches students" but prepares lessons or 'module' for B.A. History students. Shiv's life revolves around his wife and a daughter, who are now away from Delhi, in Seattle, in USA as his daughter has got a job there. His routine life includes, Department meetings, preparing modules for students.

The main event of the novel starts when Shiv gets a phone call from Meena's friend, who is studying in Kamla Nehru University, to inform him that Meena is lying in the hostel with a broken leg. He has been asked to pick up Meena from hostel so that she can recuperate. He imagines himself as a "savior of one legged girls" (Hariharan 6). Meena is a Daughter of Shiv Murthy's friend. The story takes a turn and Shiv's still and peaceful life is thrown into chaos when he finds himself in the midst of controversy when the group of critics right picks up on a series of lessons he has written on a 12th century reform figure named Basava, in which he focuses on the political rather than the religious figure. He refers to the negative effects of Basava's political activities, his loss of power and his mysterious disappearance at the end of his political career, rather than seeing him only as the founding father of social democracy with a visionary approach to caste issues the view usually emphasized historians(cf Sakhare; Ramanujan). It brought tremendous opposition and wrath of the Hindu fundamentalists group from 'Itihas Suraksha Manch', an independent social and cultural organization. They accuse Shiv of deliberately misrepresenting Basava's heritage and 'distorting' history. The whole problem arose as the result of the fundamentalists' defective perception of Basava. The fundamentalists failed to understand that the saint Basava was an iconoclast who disregarded differences of all kinds such as caste, creed and religion, economic and social status. The fundamentalists protested Shiv's lesson, claiming "...the lesson has hurt the sentiments of a Hindu watchdog group" (Hariharan 53).

Shiv Murthy is totally dominated by his wife but she is in USA and he finds himself discussing things with Meena, who is politically motivated, intellectual, self-possessed and sexually aware young woman of 24, who is by circumstances staying at his premises because of her broken leg. Itihas Suraksha Manch (Defenders of History) keeps strong conditions against professor Shiv:

The Manch lays three demands before Shiv. Firstly apology for hurting their sentiments, separate apologies from Shiv, department and by extension the university. Secondly the lesson to get retracted. Thirdly, the rewritten lesson should be submitted to the Manch. (Hariharan 69)

The Head of the department and Dean are spooked by the national media attention, and attempt to Dr Murthy to revise the controversial lesson and sign the apology. But increasingly influenced by Meena's political convictions, and her presence in his life completely transforms Shiv's sense of his role as historian. Murthy takes a plunges into politics: he defies the university and the fundamentalists and decides to act courageously, not to give in but to continue to teach, to read, and write as he thinks right despite government or mob censorship. In spite of the spread of democracy in the post-colonial world, many of today's governments treat one of the principle tenets of democracy – freedom of expression – with utter disregard. The novel explores the present day tortured face of India when human rights are blatantly violated with silent support of some politicians and there are attacks on people who cherish secular ideas. Politicians are not willing to go against the beliefs of Hindus. They do not want to affect the vote banks of Hindus. Often these action are justified on the grounds of protesting religious or public morality. Mixing

religion with politics is a deadly strategy for a modern and diverse country like ours. It is a spiralling game that could spin out of control. Through Shiv's decision Hariharan shows, not to protest against unfair is to connive at the destruction of society of environment and of truth. Shiv could extend his leave, resign, then slip out of sight. Yet, he takes a stand realizing the truth in the statement of Basava "throw away the mind and the heart rusting from disuse" (Hariharan70). When the dean frowns at him, Shiv says clearly, "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 who do not recognize as historians" (Hariharan 70). Meena and her group of friends decided to help Shiv with this issue. The controversy is heightened and politics is intruded in issue to seek some political benefit out of it. There was large scale of rallies, protest and demonstrations organized by fundamentalists against him.. The problem of a history lesson gradually developed into the problem of Muslims, Christians and other religions. Very cunning question put forth by they like, "If the Muslims can have their fundamentalist why can't we? Have we forgotten that Hindus have stood the test of time like no one else? Our fundamentalist have been around longer than theirs have so we have to show the world we are superior to them in every way" (Hariharan135). Mr Anant Tripathi, a member of the Itihas Suraksha Manch, calls people to revive Hindu courage:

We have to shed the cowardice that has grown in us with Muslims, then Europeans storming Indian shores. Though Hindus were among the bravest of the ancient peoples, repeated outside conquests have made them cowards. Even Mahatma Gandhi said so. We want to make the Hindu strong and courageous again. A meek person cannot survive. I am not only talking about muscle power. We must return to our old militant spirit if the Hindu nation is to become great again. We must spread moral and spiritual strength in the younger generation by taking teachings of courage and valour to schools and colleges (Hariharan 91).

All these incidents reflect the despotic and arbitrary nature of the various political groups, religious fundamentalist groups that how they exploit the mob psychology to earn name and fame only in the name of religion. The agitators kindle the religious feeling in order to bring chaos in the society. Hariharan wants to say that such cruel and disastrous activity by the fundamentalists in the name of religion has threatened the secular character of India. All the crimes committed in the name of religion in the past as well as in the present one cannot forget. Anita Nair writes, "In this peculiar times we live in, when even the past has only a precarious hold in time, a book like Hariharan's In times of Siege comes as a warning, disturbing and moving, it tells of how menacing religion can be in the wrong hands." Shiv suddenly finds himself in the midst of a campaign that not only generates intense media interest, but also hate mail, threatening phone calls and the ransacking of his office at the university. "The tables and chairs and book shelves are broken, the wall defaced. There are torn books everywhere, cupboard and files open minded and shambled" and they ultimately have made the history Professor "a full time fugitive" (Hariharan 131) just because he wrote the truth. Censorship, force

and violence are the tactics adopted by the fundamentalists. The University is a set of learning, occupies an exalted position in civilized society. It is the defender of academic independence and freedom of expression. But the actions of fundamentalists disturb the academic world and creates religious agitations in an academic environment. To a question on why Githa chose the university as the scene of action, she remarks: “for me the campus is not central but the outside. If in a university set up, debate, free and frank is stifled, then that shows the insidious nature of communal forces.” Replying to the question whether it does not show that academic culture and values are already atrophied and academia had already become somewhat redundant, Githa replies, “Well, yes, I do recognize and foreground the fact that there is a return to a sense of fear, persecution and ghettoisation. There is the atrophy of intellectuality and a decline of the romantic veneration of the teacher figure”.<sup>4</sup> It is a tragedy for India that persons like Shiv are becoming pawn at the hand of fundamentalists. Hariharan calls them "blood thirsty munchies" who “will break and devour everything" (Hariharan 135). Professor Murthy has to face intense political pressure that poses dangers to his life and academic career as well. Hariharan's concern for shrinking space as citizens, writers, teachers, students and rational people is reflected in this novel. She is not happy to see the present situation of India where people's mind is ‘not without fear’ as imagined by Tagore. It is rather ‘divided by narrow domestic walls’ of religion as Tagore feared. However, The novel demands if we want to consolidate democracy give firm foundations to it and make its working successful, it is necessary that Indian middle class should revolt against anti-democratic forces in our country as the hero rejects the threats of fundamentalists. The condition which Shiv faces can happen to anyone and as we have seen is happening with several others. Anyone can encounter a time of siege as part of her/his existence like the protagonist of the novel. Hariharan has correctly dedicated this novel to “all those who speak up in times of siege." Shiv with his secular ideology, represents those 'ordinarily educated and decent people' who are willing to speak up for the fundamental values that hold their world in place. Though the novel is small, there is a lot in it that makes one contemplate. It is a work full of parallels and Meena is Shiv's catalyst. Throughout the novel we find many other appellations like-fundamentalist, fascist, obscurantist, terrorist, made-in-India brand, communalist, other community haters, scum, lumpens etc. (Hariharan 57). By the end of the book the problems are not solve but dissolve. It remains an open question whether Shiv will return to the university.

After the ransacking of his office, the Hindu fundamentalists and the media lose interest not least because new stories have emerged. Shiv's feelings for Meena lead to a moment of sexual tension between the two during power blackout, but there are no consequences and the topic is never openly discussed. When Meena's leg heals, she returns to her hostel and with her departure, the story ends.

## In Conclusion

Through this novels Hariharan highlights the fact that religious fundamentalists all over the globe have been responsible for the horrific devastation of the world. Though Hariharan has written about Hindu fundamentalists, it applies to every kind of fanatic and fundamental

following of any religion. we are bound to live in a time when we are allowed less time for debate and dissent. Githa Hariharan's subtle dissections of the eternal struggle between religious fundamentalist ideas and liberal dissent in modern day India begins and ends with history. The fundamentalists are using, "History as armour...History as battle ground. History as the seed of hatred"(Hariharan 132). It explores how the historical details are distorted in order to satisfy religious faith and gain political favour. The world which collapses so abruptly around Professor Shiv Murthy is the world we see coming apart in India today. Religion encourages fanaticism and suspends our reasoning power and we repose full faith in leaders. Democracy demands open mindedness, universal brotherhood and thinking based upon reason and capable of taking its own decision. In such cases, there is no herd tendency and the person is liberal in outlook. However, in the midst of all this pandemonium the author sees a ray of hope in the nation. It is the country together of ordinary citizens to raise their voice against the injustice of the narrow and divisive politics of various political groups.

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