

# Secularism under Threat: Reading Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*

ARPITA SARDAR

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**Abstract:** Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* foregrounds the deleterious outcome of fundamentalism in present-day India. For centuries, India has witnessed the communal violence based on rigid fundamentalism resulting in genocide, vandalism of properties, and various atrocities in terms of mental and physical being. The fictional discourse clearly exposes the fact that there is no place for multiple voices to co-exist in a society like ours. The paper is an attempt to explore the shrinkage of space in terms of thought policing in the field of academia by the atrocities imposed by Hindu zealots in modern India.

*Keywords:* secularism, extremism, freedom of speech, liberalism, inner turmoil, multiculturalism

Among other novelists in postcolonial era, Hariharan has taken up the issue of growing intolerance as her thematic concern and critiques the religious fanaticism that is exciting violence in the name of preserving culture. There are many horrific instances of fundamentalist violence across ages. Demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, Gujrat carnage in 2002, exodus of Kashmiri Hindus in 1990 and Godhra train burning in 2002 are some of the examples of religious intolerance prevalent in modern India. By taking university campus as the backdrop of her novel, *In Times of Siege*, Hariharan articulates the intrusion of religiopolitical aspects in academia, which poses a serious threat in free thinking. She herself stated in one of her interviews that plurality engages her and she wants to hear many voices i.e. a variety of issues. (qtd. in Dundoo n. pag.). In this novel, Hariharan has shown how academic freedom has been set at naught and the concept of a pluralistic society is thrown to the winds because of an upsurge of religious fanaticism. A heightened sense of fundamentalism is delineated in this work of Hariharan to prove that one has to adhere to certain set of beliefs and principles, and if they are not obeyed, one is subjected to severe opposition from the extremists. The religious fundamentalists make it a point to lay stress on everything that glorifies religion and religious practices. They keep on propagating the fact that true nationalism signifies the promotion of a particular religion. The raging right-wing religious zealots are hell-bent on silencing the dissenters and thus paving way for more and more intolerance and communal division. Here, Hariharan raises her concern about this very notion of religion influencing and shaping politics. The novel is a critique of the homogenizing notion of the forced religious and cultural fundamentalism in academia and its injustice towards the religious minorities. Religious zealots' ever-growing chauvinism spreads violence at large. In these circumstances, only some conscientious and courageous people come forward to question such actions either by voicing opinions or registering protests in the face of threats from

the power-seekers. The basic question that the book poses is whether India could sustain itself as a secular country under this scenario of increasing violence and intolerance.

In the novel *In Times of Siege*, the word 'siege' connotes a place which is obstructed from all sides and the besieged gets no route for an escape. "Siege is dealt with at two levels- the clamorous siege of the street and the quieter but far more dangerous siege of the mind, where the airing of prejudice has become almost acceptable" ("A Delicate Pen"). This refers to action on the street as well research in the archive. It is important to attend to the multiple sources of historical facts and explore their various meanings. History should be unbiased in its study as far as religious and cultural compulsions are concerned; it should be guided by a free thinking. What is disappointing is that severe obstacles are always set in the path of free thinking by very many forces and elements like religious fundamentalism and cultural nationalism. Hariharan has referred to the rising phenomenon of Hindu fundamentalism, but, as Monika Gupta says, "It applies to every kind of fanatic and fundamental following of any religion" (Gupta 104).

The protagonist of the novel, Shiv Murthy, is a professor of history at an Open University in Delhi. His life revolves around the university, that is, academic meetings, lesson modules, research work related to historical articles etc. Since his wife Rekha is in the US with their daughter, Tara, he lives all by himself in his home near the university. All of a sudden, his ward Meena, who studies at Kamala Nehru University, comes to stay with him with a broken knee. Meena is an independent girl who does not bother to inform her parents regarding her injury. As a matter of fact, she does not even hesitate to live with a quite unknown man. In addition to this, Shiv's otherwise tranquil life faces a storm when the cultural group called Itihas Suraksha Mancha accuses him of distorting history and historical facts. Shiv's module on Basava, the 12<sup>th</sup>-century saint-poet at the court of King Bijjala in the city of Kalyana, incurs the wrath of the self-proclaimed preservers of history. They begin blaming him for undermining Hinduism and portraying Basava as an ordinary person. Moreover, Shiv is also charged with exaggerating caste inequality in ancient India and with showing the Brahmins and the priests in a not-so-positive light. Things get worse when Shiv's department fails to provide moral support to him. Furthermore, he gets a call from the Head of the Department, who repeated the charge:

It seems 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, you know. (Hariharan 53-54)

Shiv has delineated Basava as a man who sought to establish an egalitarian society. As he showed, Basava tried hard to bring about a revolutionary change in society. Following the marriage between a Brahmin girl and a cobbler's son, the city of Kalyana became a place of agitation. People from conservative strata of the society burnt the city and Basava left the place in despair. Such a depiction of Basava excites an uproar among the upper-caste section of the people. At this juncture, Shiv gets perturbed at the "thought of confronting fists, threats, physical danger in any form at all" (Hariharan 55-56). Meena takes the lead in providing the much-needed mental support and strength to Shiv. It is due her constant support that he could stand firm and fight for his ideals. She works as a positive catalyst in Shiv's battle to create his own space. It can also be said that Meena is the official spokesperson of Hariharan. Despite having a cast in her leg, Meena possesses

the indefatigable spirit and extreme self-assurance in her ideals and beliefs. Meena, who is writing a thesis on the plight of women after the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, believes in a quote by the German theologian Reverend Martin Niemoller: "Speak up! Before it's late". Hariharan's novel reiterates this idea in some way or other. Meena inspires Shiv to take a solid stand, "Why pretend you are a professor if you can't stand up to someone telling you what to think? Shiv, do you imagine an ordinary man cannot be a hero?" (Hariharan 64).

Infused with a new determination, Shiv decides that he will neither apologise for his interpretation of history nor will he retract his lessons or views for revision. This new facet of Shiv is praiseworthy when he says, "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 historians" (Hariharan 69-70). The Hindu zealots started maligning the professor in their own way of holding meetings, processions, newspaper articles, and so on. People like the president of Itihas Suraksha Manch and retired professor Shri A.A Atre makes use of this opportunity to occupy the centrestage of power and authority. This novel exemplifies how the battle between extreme culturalism and liberalism can create pressure on creativity like art, history, and culture. Politics of surveillance is potent enough to create violence in the civil society. In these trying times, Shiv utters, "Only a sanitized Basava is allowed to remain, a 'saint-singer', a singer with a saintly face. This toothless man is safe enough to be hung on walls, a bland calendar memory" (Hariharan 86).

It has often been found that academic writings which include historical and mythological figures, fall into a web of controversy. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasreen and artists like M.F. Hussain became refugees and faced ostracism because of their portrayal of sensitive subjects. In 'Silencing of liberal India', Pratap Bhanu Mehta opines that lack of stringent legal system, not-so-strong institutions and religio-political influence are to be blamed for this kind of attack in liberalism (Mehta n.pag.). In this context, it is to be noted that Shiv's case has a striking similarity with what happened with the eminent historian Romila Thapar. She had faced the ire of the so-called Hindu Right for not glorifying Hinduism and its cultural practices in ancient India. It is extremely crucial to quote what Thapar says about academic and responsible historical research:

Professional historical writing requires a critical enquiry that includes the application of historical methodology, assessing the reliability of evidence and drawing on logical argument in making casual connections. It differentiates between the invention of a narrative that fantasizes about the past and an interpretation that attempts to critically analyse the evidence. History is not an arbitrary narrative where myth can override facts. (Thapar n. pag.)

Opposed to Shiv is positioned Dr. Arya, having ideological affiliation with the Hindu Right. At the beginning of the novel, in one of the academic meetings, Dr. Arya posits his basic proposition that Islam and Christianity are foreign religions and they should be termed as 'invaders'. In his own words: "Our land has always been a temptation to greedy marauders, barbarous invaders and oppressive rulers. This invasion and resistance is three thousand years old. Lakhs of foreigners found their way to India during these thousands of years, but they all suffered humiliating defeat" (Hariharan 19).

This statement from Dr. Arya immediately focuses attention on Mrs. Khan, the secretary of the department. She becomes embarrassed at the complexity of her religious identity. This also impacts negatively on her usual struggles against gender disparity and class

distinctions. In his essay, "The Indian Identity", Amartya Sen has observed that essentializing a person by his religious affiliation eventually shrinks his other identities like gender, social strata, ethnicity, and caste. Sen further comments that it is not correct to brush aside a person's myriad identities for the sake of emphasizing a unitary identity. Inflexibility towards polyolithic identity can create intolerance and violence to other people. (Sen 349-356). To quote Sen:

Any classification according to a singular identity polarizes people in a particular way, but if we take note of the fact that we have many different identities - related not just to religion but also to language, occupation and business, politics, class and poverty, and many others - we can see that the polarization of one can be resisted by a fuller picture. So knowledge and understanding are extremely important to fight against singular polarization. (Sen n. pag.)

Shiv feels a threat to secularism and feels his vocation as a historian terribly questioned. The role of Meena in Shiv's crisis is highly commendable as she leaves no stone unturned to bring the positive change in Shiv's thought process. Being an activist, Meena gets the aid of her coterie of secular friends in the attempt to support Shiv's revisionary reading of history. They organise TV interviews, distribute leaflets and hold dharnas in defence of secularism. As Meena says, "The link between fascism and ugly faces of Hindutva unveiling themselves around us is the regimentation of thought and the brutal repression of culture" (Hariharan 101).

While the Arya camp is hell-bent on propagating Hindutva-centric ideologies, Meena's liberal camp, supported by organizations like the Secular Women against Patriarchy (SWAP), 'Forum against Hindu Terrorism (FAHT) and People's association of Secular Scientists (PASS), is fighting for the cause of religious and cultural plurality. One of the placards reads "STOP TALIBANIZATION OF INDIA" (Hariharan 147).

Meena's youthful enthusiasm compels Shiv to explore into the area of action which is a completely new characteristic persona for him. The novel very aptly captures the transformation from an ineffectual academician to a fighter who stands for his own basic human rights. Meena, a constant source of inspiration for Shiv, speaks with full determination when she utters, "You can't avoid a confrontation, you have to get the head to meet all of you. Even better, you have to confront this Arya. Ignoring him is not going to make him go away" (Hariharan 119). However, Professor Shiv could not avoid violence thrust on him. His room at the department got vandalised:

His room, his books, stripped naked. A sullied place, no longer anyone's refuge. His room has been pushed into no-man's land. The table and chairs and bookshelves are broken, the walls defaced. There are torn books everywhere, cupboard and files open-mouthed and in shambles. (Hariharan 130-131)

It is a matter of probe whether all the perpetrators knew the exact cause behind the horrible wreckage of a professor's room that they had carried on. Hariharan has rightly stated that it takes only the price of a mere meal to hire people for creating chaos which has nothing to do with their lives. History is used by these religious zealots to sow the seeds of violence in a civilized society. Historians at different times have often faced such attacks from religious and cultural groups and unpleasant controversies go on unabated. In India, secularism reflects quite an ambiguous and contradictory concept as both the fundamentalists and liberals propagate their own narratives. In 'The Crisis of Secularism in India' (2007), Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan and Anuradha Needham point to this phenomenon:

The Indian state has chosen to interpret secularism differently, it has undertaken the charge to ensure the protection of all religions. It therefore makes a huge investment in matters of religion, unlike any nation in the west - for example, by administering religious trusts, declaring national holidays for religious festivals, preserving the system of different personal laws for different communities, undertaking the reform of religious law, having secular courts interpret religious laws, and so on. This raises the problem of where the boundaries of state secularism are to be drawn. (Rajan and Needham 20)

Hariharan incorporates into the narrative an incident where the seeds of communalist ideologies become synonymous with everyday life. Shiv reminisces visiting Hampi, the capital city of Vijayanagar empire, of the fourteenth century. By the sixteenth century, the city was reduced to ashes by the Muslim Sultanates of the Deccan. Though Shiv was aware of the destruction of the city, he was not prepared for the scale of ruins. In Hariharan's words, "A city planned to flaunt its glory, intimidate the subjects into subjection. And all the grandeur, like its kindred great cities, invariably built on the blood and sweat of hovels swallowed up by time" (Hariharan 158). By witnessing such appalling wreckage, Shiv's companion, the Auto rickshaw driver, Suban started to feel terribly shaken of his religious identity. Suban had taken it on himself part of the guilt of the communal violence that the religious group with whom he gets identified had committed in the past. Because of his double-marginalization (lower class and Muslim) Suban feels the compulsion to vehemently condemn the acts of violence by the Deccan Sultanates. As an individual he has absolutely no role to play but in terms of group identity he feels connected and responsible for the destruction of the glorious Hindu kingdom. Thus the past with this kind of horrific actions will go on haunting the present as well bedeviling it. It is appalling to note how religious affiliation affects present everyday life and social interactions amongst people. With this encounter, Shiv could fathom that the dreams of our secular leaders of having a syncretic vision in a multicultural society got annihilated by religious intolerance and extreme fanaticism. Communal bigotry has demolished the ideal concept of a multi-religious country. It is evident "that the world and its multitudinous mysteries are reduced to precarious survival on a crude seesaw: saint versus leader, saint versus man, Golden Age versus Dark ages, Hindu versus Muslim, Hindu versus Christian, anti-Hindu, pro-Hindu. Secularist, pseudo-secularist, soft Hindu, rabid Hindu" (Hariharan 150).

Besides Meena's provocation, Shiv is highly influenced by his father's memory who was a revolutionary in the independence movement. Shiv's father went for a meeting in Indore but never returned. Shiv could never come to terms with the mystery of his father's sudden disappearance. To him, both his father and Basava stand for secular ideologies who do not believe in prejudices. Both wanted to change the conventional way of thinking and sought to effect a radical overhaul of the existing framework. While Basava raised voice against caste stratification, Shiv's father fought for independence and later his struggle continued to form a classless society. A true historian's mind should be open to new ideas and he should be flexible enough to accept the heterogeneity of truth rather than embracing the monolithic version of the past. As regards secular ideologies, the years 1168, 1962, and 2000 are all connected irrespective of the age and socio-political background. It is apt to quote Linda Hutcheon's statement,

In both fiction and history writing today, our confidence in empiricist and positivist epistemologies has been shaken. [Historiographic metafiction] problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here-just unresolved contradiction" (Hutcheon 106).

University is a place for individual growth and the nation's development where free thinking and the ability to exercise free expression should be practised. Knowledge must not be dependent on personal predilections which might distort and prejudice free-thinking. If political and religious agendas cast an influence on academic curriculum, creativity and imagination would face hindrance in some way or other. History and literature often come under the surveillance of the extremists because both the disciplines deal with narratives from and about the past and the present. They take it upon themselves to make arbitrary judgements on any form of art to serve their politicking. And they pounce on the authors and filmmakers if they deviate even a bit from their preconceived notions of history, community, race and ethnicity. The evolving history of mutual trust and respect, of the possibility of unity in cultural, religious and linguistic diversity get lost in the process. Rather, on the contrary, as Arundhati Roy laments, "that heritage of hatred and mutual distrust has been exacerbated, toyed with, and never allowed to heal by politicians. Over the past 50 years, ordinary citizens' modest hopes for lives of dignity, security and relief from abject poverty have been systematically snuffed out" ("Fascism alive").

Through the characterization of Mrs. Khan and the 1984 anti-Sikh riot survivor Jasbinder, Hariharan posits how religion, social class and gender coincide in fixing identity. The novel foregrounds the necessity of female subjectivity, the utmost importance of speaking out. Shiv's wife Rekha discourages him to take a stand in fear of the threat to her family. Moreover, Shiv's daughter, Tara shows her inclination towards religiosity and is upset by her father's critical approaches towards priests and religious practices. Meena is, however, a sharp contrast to the other female characters, defying the timidity and inhibitions ordinarily associated with her gender. She has the courage to dissent and instils the same spirit in others. She inspires Shiv to come out of his safe nook and fight for his rights. Meena had served as the inspiring spirit and prop for Shiv to come out and achieve true selfhood. The novel thus also charts Shiv's psychic journey from darkness to illumination. In Hariharan's words, "Once he throws away all safe crutches, he can truly walk in the present. Be free to be curious, to speculate; to debate, dissent. Reaffirm the value of the only heirloom he needs from the past, the right to know a thing in all the ways possible" (Hariharan 194).

It is worth analysing the fact that Meena's cast has been used as a metaphor. Though her leg is covered with a plaster, it does not prevent her mobility. On the contrary, an invisible cast is thwarting people in forming a unified nation in the garb of religion, caste and creed. The novel ends with Meena leaving the house of Shiv. He hands over his father's walking stick to her, freeing himself from his father's haunting memory. He is sure that the younger generation will preserve his father's secular ideas and Gandhian ethics. This act of Shiv metaphorically suggests that there is a hope of a tolerant and liberal nation in the future. Hariharan does not end the novel with a concrete conclusion; the novel leaves enough gaps and doubts in the reader's mind. In the battle between secularists and fanatics, it is left undecided who wins and who loses. It is more important to continue to fight against fundamentalism of all sorts, religious, intellectual, ideological and cultural. It is in this ceaseless negotiation and contestation that the triumph of liberalism can be envisioned. At the end, both the characters are freed from their respective casts. While Meena gets freed from her literal cast i.e. the plaster, Shiv can shrug off the haunting of his dead father. Shiv's massive transformation from a nebbish professor to an enthusiastic person runs parallel with the main theme of the novel, i.e. to question fundamentalism of all sorts, thereby emancipating and shaping free thinking.

*In Times of Siege* speaks of the marginalised and weaker sections of society, and more importantly looks forward to voices of protest from them, while looking askance at the silence of the intellectuals. Through her protagonist Shiv, Hariharan lays stress on the urgency to speak up for the vulnerable. The role of the media too has been taken into account to achieve the cause. Though life is shown to have suffered enough sieges at the hands of orthodoxy and fanaticism of all sorts and though the characters have experienced enough rifts, the novel ends with a celebration of life and free expression as its essence. *In Times of Siege* critiques the contemporary state of affairs when secularism is under the threat of collapse, but at the same time holds out the utopian concept of living in peace in a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society as a nation. It is to that goal that the book develops its courageous ideas, hoping that these ideas would also grip the minds of others. As Sehgal has once said, "Ideas have no life of their own; something has to be done about them or they languish for centuries with no impact on the living" (Sehgal 82). Therein lies the real need of a book that can make ideas aesthetically compelling and acceptable for us.

Jadavpur University, Kolkata

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