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Resisting regimentation



GITHA HARIHARAN'S new book, *In Times of Siege* (Viking, Rs. 295), is about a history academic whose text on the medieval saint Basava attracts the unexpectedly violent attention of Hindu fundamentalist groups. **ANURADHA ROY** talks to her about the book.

Your book captures the common man thrown unwittingly into political troubles and forced into taking a position: is the novel a cautionary tale for placid "liberals"?

YES, to the extent that it is possible for many people to be "liberal" because they are not directly, painfully affected by the oppression of the authorities they are critical of. Recent experiences — Gujarat for example — show that the times of siege we are talking about have stripped the cushioning of even this usually comfortably placed class. The liberal in the novel, Shiv, says in some desperation when he sees the "opposition" is not as united as they need to be: "Forget your little arguments, the enemy is almost at our heels! If this can happen to an ordinary, cautious man like me, what about you ideologywallas?" But the novel is also saying that when pushed to a point where a choice has to be made, many of those we think of as "just ordinary, decent people" will speak up for the fundamental values that hold their world in place — peace and harmony so that everyone in society can go about their business, as well as the basic freedom to think, speak, and ask questions. This is what happened during the Emergency, after the demolition of Babri Masjid, and after the Gujarat carnage.

When making fiction out of contemporary upheaval, did you have any literary models, like Coetzee's *Disgrace*, for example, in mind?

There was almost too much from real life threatening to push its way into the novel as I wrote it. The challenge was to contain the times we are living through into an individual, human story. But you are asking about literary models. I am not consciously aware of models as I write; but certainly I am, like all writers, deeply indebted to the writing I admire. In this sense Coetzee's writing has always been a model for me — and this is true as much of **Age of Iron** as of **Disgrace**. There are chilling, heartbreaking parallels between apartheid and communalism, just as there are between Hitler's fascism and Hindutva.

Could you say something about your use of the Basava story?



I came across A.K. Ramanujan's translation of medieval Kannada *vachanas* when I was a college student. I am still amazed by the contemporary voice of these poems — they are ruthless in their commitment to social equality and in their questioning of formal religion. Basava was a poet and politician who asked dangerous questions, about caste for instance. He was also a reformer — what we would today call an activist. A deeply religious man, he mocked pious, caste-obsessed chauvinists. He wrote, for example: "there are so many gods there's no place for a foot." Or he taunted them that they used the same thing — water — in their temples as well as their lavatories. Basava is just the sort of complex man who cannot be interpreted in just one, "official" way as we are being bullied into doing with so many icons. If we are regimented into seeing the past, and figures from the past, in the way our present history-rewriters want us to see them, we are going to lose the richness of those lives, times and ideas. The next step, of course, is that we will have to judge the present too with this impoverished worldview: say these are "saints" or those are "foreigners".

For a man much given to reflection, Shiv, the 50-something professor, goes unquestioningly by his instincts in his passion for the young student. What was your intention in depicting this relationship?

Reflection and instinct are more or less balanced in Shiv — as much as they are in many men of his age and position! His response to Meena is understandable, not just because he is a cautious, rather unglamorous middle-aged man and she is a passionate, outspoken young woman — but because he is being challenged for the first time on both personal and political fronts. In his life before the crisis brought on by the fundamentalists — what Meena calls the

fundoos — Shiv sidestepped commitment in every way. Personally, this meant a halfhearted little affair with a colleague if his marriage was not quite what it should be. But his obsession with Meena is not just physical — it's also his fearful fascination for everything her world stands for: risk and danger, choice and commitment.

The novel demonstrates the oppressiveness of reducing "multitudinous mysteries" to oversimplified opposites. Have you, living on a university campus, found things oppressive at times from this point of view?

You don't need to live on a campus to see either the past, or the modern Indian experiment of a multi-cultural nation, reduced to crude dichotomies. Our world is pervaded by the "us and them" mindset as never before.

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