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Close to the bone

Well-being comes in one piece, and repression in one area will not leave other areas unaffected, says Githa Hariharan, who was in town last week, and whose latest book places Basavanna in a communally tense present.



Photo: V. Sreenivasa Murthy

ABOUT TEN minutes into the conversation with Githa Hariharan, I understand exactly why she had to write *In Times of Siege*. Just like why she had to go to court to challenge the law that a mother could not be the natural guardian of her children unless the father was dead.

Githa Hariharan is that kind of person. She believes that "well-being does not come piecemeal, for rights co-exist, and repression in one area will not leave other areas unaffected".

It was thus imperative for her to legally challenge the infringement of her rights as a mother when the bank where she wanted to open a savings account for her one-year-old son told her that unless she had her husband's approval, if their marriage ever broke up, she would, as a matter of course, forfeit the money to him.

Githa decided to go to court. Indira Jaisingh fought her case and in the landmark decision that has become an important part of the history of women's legal rights in India, the court ruled that the mother "would undoubtedly be the natural guardian," according to the Indian Constitution.

It was just as essential to speak up and defy what is clearly a concerted attempt to curb the fundamental right to know and to creatively challenge this violation of (her) rights as a citizen, particularly since these attempts are clearly not anymore limited to what used to be called the "lunatic fringe".

"They are not the fringe, they are the mainstream, and even the mildest sort of tolerance of any bigotry or chauvinism and you will be bitten like the cobra in the pitcher which will bite if you put your hand in. The snake in the pitcher is undoubtedly the kind of bigotry that is slowly becoming more rampant."

Thus Shiva, the hero of her novel, *In Times of Siege*, refuses to go down under the hammer of fundamentalist assertions that all knowledge must conform to the acceptable homogenised version, dictated, of course, by them.

Githa speaks of how important it was to say what she is saying in this, the novel, which is not "just a novel for me", saying also that she thinks it is going to be the Shivs of this world — decent, respectable middle-class people — who will come out and say that we need these basic freedoms.

This is a world that she knows intimately, explains Githa, living, as she does, on campus in JNU, being publicly and politically engaged and in constant contact with the academic and writerly world of Delhi.

Asked if she thought she could have written *In Times of Siege* had she been living down South, Githa begins by saying that she has lived in many cities and has in previous novels invented landscapes that could be located in almost any city, Mumbai, Bangalore... and is suddenly stopped short by what the question suggests. "What an extraordinary question," she says and goes on, thinking aloud, "When I moved there, it took me many years to reconcile to Delhi. Somehow in this novel it seemed important to locate it in this city so redolent of political power, where, even the molecules of air seem weighed down with it... in this city of opportunists. Yes, in this book, there is a great departure in strategy. Definitely, the book had to be set in Delhi."

But the book's main artery is in the South, Karnataka, in fact.

For Shiv's predicament arises from the history lesson he has written for an open university, a lesson on the life of Basavanna, the 12th Century social reformer, where the pain, passion, and anger are not hidden to present a plastic saint. Alongside the actual events of Shiv's troubles, caused by the "fundoos" in and outside the Ithihaas Suraksha Manch, who have decided that the lesson is inappropriate and must be banned for disregarding the official version of Hinduism and of Hindu saints — homogenous, untroubled, and benign.

Why Basavanna? Why not a woman, Akka Mahadevi, for instance?

"When I first encountered the vachanas as a 17-year-old student in Bombay, in the A.K. Ramanujan translation, it was Akka's vachanas that spoke to me immediately. They cut so close to the bone, I was completely overwhelmed. Over the years, the vachanas have stayed with me. But Basavanna speaks so directly and his assertion that you are not your function is as relevant today as is his questioning of caste. I think Basavanna more than anyone else objects to questioning this picture that the Hindu world is a homogenous whole."

Githa speaks at length about how we "short-change the collective memory of our historical figures" by putting them on pedestals and ironing out their pain, doubts, and the passion. In the context of the novel, Basavanna was also more suitable because there was already a precedent of an attempt to ban a literary work (the play by H.S. Shivaprakash) based on his

life.

So, have there been threats following the publication of *In Times of Siege*?

"Just reactions, predictable reactions from individuals and publications who are known to be in bed with the fundos. But what pleases me is the fact that apart from the customary literary reactions, a number of people who are not the usual fiction readers have responded so well to the book."

Githa Hariharan has always believed that political attitudes 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. The writing may finally be flawed, but it would have taken those important risks.

Githa usually does her own editing work even while engaged in writing a novel because it is "necessary to be able to wield a sharp pencil and a sharp scissors" when sending one's own writing out into the world to be able to read and reread and cut where necessary.

In the final stages, where the focus is too sharply concentrated on the writing, however, it becomes impossible to do anything but concentrate on one's own final draft.

For anybody who wants to know more about her writing and work, you can get to githahariharan.com

Apart from "Dickens, Trollope, Gaskell and company when I have a flu," Githa's favourite authors are Amitav Ghosh, Mahashwetha Devi, "for the life and the writing", Paul Zachariah, "for his whimsical lyricism and the way he sticks his neck out", Arundathi Roy for her passion, which speaks to a whole generation of young people, and then J.M. Coetzee and Andre Brink.

At the moment, Githa has just finished *The Winning Team*, a children's book for the age group 12 to 15, coming out in Rupa and is feeling rather pleased because it is a real test to write for children.

I leave Githa Hariharan with a sense that perhaps we need the academic, the activist, and the creative to come in the kind of combination that it does in her. Here's to a gutsy, charming, eloquent, sensible, and humorous woman.

KALA KRISHNAN RAMESH

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