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## Plea for pluralism

In her novel "In Times of Siege", Githa Hariharan expresses her angst over the betrayal of the secularist vision which shaped the nation, and the rise of fundamentalism. GOWRI RAMNARAYAN talks to the author...



WHAT HAPPENS when a fumbling middle-aged academic is confronted with the fearsome forces of fanaticism? Githa Hariharan's protagonist Shiv Murthy, writing modules for the history course in the open university, is plunged "In Times of Siege" when his lesson on the Kannada saint poet Basava is denounced by the Itihaas Suraksha Manch as unpatriotic and anti-Hindu. The Vice-Chancellor gets cold feet, urges the man to retract, apologise, resign, avoid the media.

Hariharan's angst is over the betrayal of the secularist vision which shaped the nation, the shrinkage of space in contemporary India for debate, dissent, for the co-existence of pluralities, minorities, cultures.

To make her point she juxtaposes three ages from the past with the current rise of the 'fundos' (fundamentalists): the Virasaiva movement of the 12th Century in Kalyan city wrought a social upheaval, protesting against all discriminations, including those based on caste and gender; the 16th Century sacking of the Vijayanagara empire. Finally, there is the 'nationalism' practised by freedom fighters like Murthy's own father, wholly different from the saffronised version of today. The unheroic protagonist examines these heritage chapters to arrive at some understanding of his legacy.

There are three women in Murthy's life. Wife Rekha believes nothing can go wrong so long as her house and garden are well tended. Colleague Amita partners a fainthearted affair. House guest Meena, a student activist, challenges him simultaneously on the political and personal fronts, forcing Murthy to commit himself not in a written module, but before the public eye and TV camera. The man who has slunk unobtrusively through life in the wings, surprises himself by taking a centrestage stance against repression.

"In Times Of Siege" has an easy flow, a lucid structure. It starts with acute visuals and sharp characterisation. You can see why Hariharan, (author of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize winner "The Thousand Faces of the Night", "The Art of Dying", "The Ghosts of Vasu Master", "When Dreams Travel") has won glowing tributes from J.M.Coetzee and Michael Ondaatje. But soon the issue swallows the characters. The plea for a liberal, pluralist secularism is as straightforward as the "fundoo" slogan. The realistic narrative has few ambiguities, and fewer shades of grey. However, with examples from real life — whether the Staines murder, the "Water" (Deepa Mehta's film) controversy, or the uproar over Husain's Saraswati — the text is a reminder of the bigotry around us, and of the dangers of silence.

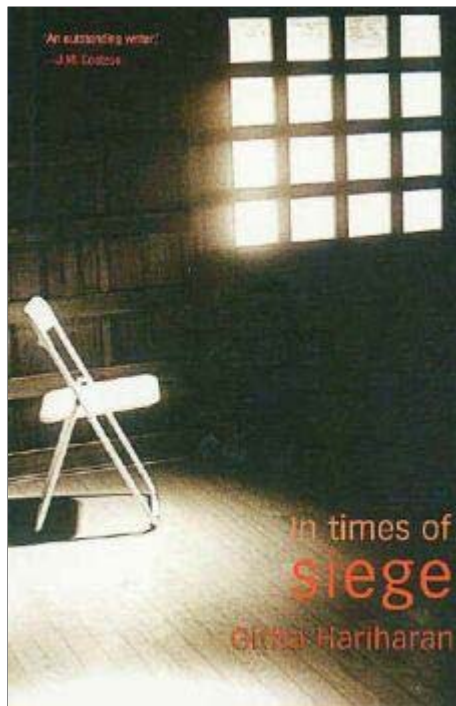
Excerpts from an interview:

**Did you opt for a male protagonist because you felt that a man can be a more convincing wimp than a woman?**

(Laughs) As a writer, I am not interested in people who are full of certainties. In my books I have alternately used male and female voices. But both the male voices I have used in "The Ghosts of Vasu Master" and "In Times of Siege" transcend gender — they are not cliched males full of certainties. The young activists Meena and Amar ("In Times of Siege") somewhat sectarian at the start, are seen in quite human terms at the end. Shiv began as a liberal but with ideas never put to the test. Ideas can get tested only in times of siege — the Emergency, after Babri Masjid, the Gujarat carnage or the Iraq war. Then people have to reclaim these ideas and discover whether they really own them or not.

**Why did you prefer to focus on history when art has been censored much more over the centuries?**

History is a contested area and is used for gaining present political ends whether in South Africa, Germany or India. So I start with a history text book controversy, move on to a historian looking at different interpretations of the past. For all of us history is a tool to understand ourselves and our times. Yes, we may know that under a mosque there's a temple, but the problem begins when they come up with an `authorised' official version of the past in its entirety, seeking a range of censorship rights. "We had this glorious pure golden Hindu age, and then the outsiders-foreigners-minorities came and mixed things up." History is then distorted to paint a false monolithic picture, for power mongering. That's why I used Basava, to get the caste system in. Everytime there is a pretence that India had a glorious, golden homogeneous world, we can say what about caste, caste, caste, just like Basava did. It's also important to remember that the same people who are willing to cede economic space, to give it away to MNCs to make India a window display of products, also claim they are cultural nationalists. They are `patriotic' with a whitewashed view of a single, continuous, homogenous Hindu past, as if we haven't always had different levels or contesting traditions. Just look at how Basava is painted by his "adherents", who hold a world view antithetical to everything he believed in!



**The inhuman Narasimha becomes the counterpoint to the humanising Basava. But to me your Vijayanagara connection is not as clear as the Kalyan experiment. Was it the presence of mercenaries of both religions in the warring factions that interested you?**

What interested me was the need to see a multiplicity of factors to understand the sacking of the city, far more complex than the neat text book summary of a mighty Hindu kingdom plundered by a Muslim foe. Can we cut the world we live in into black and white?

**What does multicultural Hampi mean to you in this context?**

It stands for the monumental past but also the oppressive past. Many historians see Vijayanagara as a slightly artificial, somewhat backward looking Hindu empire; its monuments are linked with nationalism very different from, say, the nationalism we knew during the freedom movement. A Vijayanagara building stands for the greatness of the state and awes the citizen into subjection, even Nature conspired to strike awe through boulders. **Why have you chosen to be direct and unambiguous when the trend is for the complex, elliptical, magical?**

There is no place or time in this book for magic, it was important to me to address the problem head on. But "In Times of Siege" is carefully structured, with unlikely links between different kinds of time and space, its complexity may not be obvious. I've gone backstage to look at several people, their fears, apprehensions, nobilities, deceptions. I've done this with the dubious magic of day to day life.

**So the novel is really about what Basava calls 'putting your hand into a basket of cobras'.**

Yes. I'd say the cobra is the unilateral worldview of bigotry, prejudice, ignorance...Our fundooos are made of venom. I'd say the minute you try to co-exist with a cobra you'd get bitten.

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**Reflection of social reality**

AT A meet-the-author event organised by Penguin Books India and the British Council,

Chennai, Githa Hariharan was introduced by Nirmala Lakshman, joint editor, *The Hindu*, as a writer who had chosen not to amuse or entertain, but to speak of "the compelling truths of everyday reality." She described "In Times of Siege" as a book that "chillingly reflects the realities of India, with the brutalising processes, and the self destructive, divisive tendencies set in motion in our society today."

Reading extracts from the novel, Hariharan explained that she did not realise that her central metaphor of the "siege" would acquire a global significance by the time the text was published. She added that another key term ("fundoo" for fundamentalists) came from Pakistani friends, who asked, "Why is India following our fundoo trail?"

Some of the questions that followed were reflective ("How do ordinary people make themselves heard"), others wondered if the book would have any impact on lay readers wary of secularism, though, after Godhra, it was clear that no one in any part of India was safe from violence. The importance of a university setting for the novel was recognised — where education did not break but reinforced walls. There were references to both Hindutva and Marxist invasions of history.

Tellingly, the questions sought solutions from the author for the issues raised in the book. Literary aspects were left untouched.

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