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REVIEW

Arise, Paper Tiger

Resurrecting the all-too-familiar battle of our historical establishment

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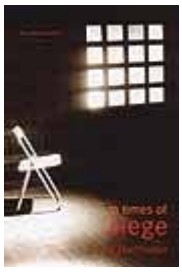

In Times of Siege
By By Githa Hariharan
Penguin/Viking
Rs 295,Pages:204

Githa Hariharan's new novel, *In Times of Siege*, is not only quite as contemporary as today's newspaper, but tomorrow's as well. That is what makes it literature—i.e., news that stays news—rather than mere journalism. At the centre of the novel, there is a Prof Shivamurthy, historian at an "open" university where—Hariharan has a dig at management jargon—he doesn't really teach, but "coordinates resources for his educational clients". The comfortable tedium of his existence is rudely broken by a controversy over a lesson that has been in use for some years. The louts of the Itihas Suraksha Manch have belatedly discovered that the saintly Basava has been depicted as human. They (no prizes for guessing who) wish to have the lesson withdrawn, and the professor humiliated, and worse. The authorities dither—as they typically do in the face of such threats—and Shivamurthy finds himself cast in the role of a reluctant hero, caught between louts who trash his study, and defenders who, drawn largely from a university curiously like JNU, rise to his defence and to the defence of the cloudy ideals usually recalled (only) at such moments of crisis: academic freedom, historical truth, secularism, etc. Interwoven with this story, there is a small, private one about a ward of Shivamurthy's—daughter of a childhood friend, now studying at knu—who breaks her leg and, temporarily disabled, seeks refuge with her "local guardian". There is a faint aura—and, briefly, a little more—of sexuality in this arrangement.... But the real narrative purpose of this divertissement is not only to enable Shivamurthy to meet with real students, but also to represent the small, private life—messy, unheroic, but not without its ambiguous satisfactions, at once guilty and innocent—that is at stake when an imperative, demanding history, like our unhappy present, here taking the ironic form of the history controversy, overruns ordinary lives. Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes. Unlikely heroes, too.

Contempt for history comes in two basic flavours. First, there's the Henry Ford dictum, gleefully recycled by schoolboys the world over: History is bunk. Closely allied to it is the apparently opposite dictum enunciated in Orwell's 1984: He who controls the past controls the future. The past has no real existence, it's wholly malleable, and inconvenient bits can be consigned to the "memory hole". History is plastic.

This latter view is, of course, very much a la mode. All the best people—ambitious students, trendy professors—frequently subscribe to some version of it. And there is a great deal to be said for the plurality of truths, for the view that things are "true" from particular perspectives, and within particular axiomatic universes. But the multiplication of truths has had one unfortunate, and perhaps unintended, consequence—the implicit notion of falsehood, of untruth, of lies, has acquired a vicious, destructive energy, particularly in the hands of political "intellectuals", (barely) caricatured in Hariharan's Itihas Manch. One may

reasonably be tentative about truth-claims, but one needs a firm notion of lies in order to deal with the current gang.

What is at issue here? Neil Postman described the purpose of education in earthy terms: to endow the student with a "crap-detector". Lewis Namier, the great conservative historian, said it more sedately: the reward of a lifetime of doing history, he said, was not necessarily a knowledge of how things happened, but a sure sense of how they couldn't have happened. *This* is the real target of the semi-literate tampering that now passes for educational policy. History teaching, ideally, should consist of familiarising students with ways of interpreting the known record in any instance—and seeking to equip them with analytical and forensic skills that enable them to make sense of it for themselves. Instead, the poor fellows—your children and mine—will be force-fed a diet of "facts", duly certified by anonymous historians of the NCERT, and by the archaeologists who supervised the destruction of the Babri Masjid.

What is at issue, perhaps, isn't history at all. After all, history will continue to be studied, researched and debated by real historians. But the analytical skills a study of history might ideally provide—the old NCERT textbooks were far from ideal, but were infinitely better than their dumbed-down replacements—will, as ever, be available only to an elite. As for the great mass of the people, they will have been conned once again, and deprived of a crucial means of intellectual advancement. But perhaps other kinds of "advancement"—through the political application of simple-minded violence, a la Gujarat—will become more readily available. After all, as a character in Hariharan's novel asks poignantly: "What kind of country poisons the minds of children, of its youth?" I fear that we are about to find out.

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