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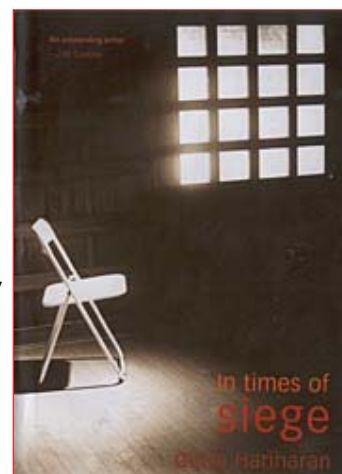
Manju Jaidka

In Times of Siege

by Githa Hariharan. Viking, 2003. Pages 206. Rs 295.

The issues that *In Times of Siege* deals with are those which have been around for a while even as we stood by, watching helplessly.

GITHA Hariharan, who shot into prominence with her Commonwealth Prize-winning novel, *The Thousand Faces of the Night*, later followed by *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and *When Dreams Travel*, is one of the leading Indian writers who write in English. Her latest novel, *In Times of Siege*, takes up a contemporary situation, focusing on a middle-aged professor in an open university in New Delhi. Passionately committed to his subject, Professor Shiv Murthy spends his time researching and writing history lessons which are then mailed to students enrolled in the distance education course. His life straddles two different worlds: that of the subject he specialises in, the glorious past of the Vijayanagar Empire, and the nondescript present in which he lives a routine academic life. Other individuals peopling his world are a wife (at present away to visit their daughter in America), a female colleague with whom he has an on-off half-hearted affair, a bickering 'fundoo' colleague (i.e., with fundamentalist leanings), and a few other caricatured characters.



One would not expect an ordinary university teacher's life to have many surprises, but in the span of just a month and a half, two unrelated upheavals take place, dividing Shiv's life into a Before and After. The first occurs when Meena, a ward and daughter of an old friend whose existence (in a women's hostel in another campus of the city) he was but dimly aware of, breaks her leg and has to be brought into his house in the absence of his wife. The intrusion of a young, politically conscious woman, with her entourage of friends and comrades, into his placid humdrum life opens a whole new world before him. While he is still adjusting to this invasion of his private space, the second event is triggered off by a lesson he had written on the ancient reformer-poet Basava some years ago. Suddenly, and inexplicably, this lesson arouses the ire of 'fundoo's' who clamour for his blood — for he has allegedly misrepresented the great poet, not given due credit to the glories of the past heritage, and hurt the religious sentiments of a certain sect of people. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

The two unrelated events coalesce into one and their full impact hits Shiv. As a result, what could have been just another love-story on a beaten track — an affair between an ageing professor and a 20-something research student — now takes a different direction, moving into the political arena, dealing with issues that keep surfacing time and again. Communal violence, for instance, is a recognisable ugliness in the novel: echoes of the Mandir-Masjid debate reverberate, the demolition of the Babri Masjid becoming a metaphor for the collapse of values that could have held a nation together.

The distortions of history by political parties in power, the 'Hinduisation' of education, and the interference in academics by the 'knicker brigade' — these are related issues that Hariharan explores. It is not an accidental that Shiv is a

professor of history. Immersed in the past, he would probably never have come out of the time warp had Meena not intruded into his scheme of things, forcing him to confront contemporary issues. The story of Basava and the Vijayanagar kingdom of yore finds a contemporary parallel in the trials and tribulations of Shiv in New Delhi. So, a precarious balance is maintained between antiquity and contemporaneity.

An important concern of the novel is the re-writing of history. What, after all is history, and whose history can claim to be the real truth? As in the film *Rashomon*, each party has a different version of the truth and each version has its validity. The learned academic may cry himself hoarse, insisting on the objectivity of his account, but the hired, illiterate mob bent on destruction, would have different ideas. The university authorities, well aware of the power of the mob, would ultimately bow down before the rabble and concede to its irrational demands. (Again, sounds familiar, doesn't it?) Such a scenario is recreated in *In Times of Siege*. When the mindless, irrational masses take over, how can the voice of the intellectual be heard or understood above the din?

Hariharan explores all these related issues in a slow, ambulatory manner, lingering over the buzzing of a fly or the humming of a fan or the itch of human flesh imprisoned in a plaster cast. Often the reader would like to hasten her pace but, on second thoughts, the narratorial pace seems to be appropriate for the purpose, quite in tune with the cerebral numbness experienced by the main protagonist, the mental paralysis produced by events beyond one's control. As the novel draws our attention to censorship and the freedom of speech, there are references to other instances when the voice of the intellectual has been ruthlessly silenced by fundamentalism – Salman Rushdie's, for instance, or Taslima's. The last of Deepa Mehta's trilogy, *Water*, the filming of which was abandoned on similar grounds, is also mentioned. The issues that *In Times of Siege* deals with, thus, are those which have been around for a while even as we stood by, watching helplessly. Blending fact with fiction, Hariharan gives us yet another perspective on the unresolved (and unresolvable?) problems of our times, tacitly asking us what we are doing about them. *Are we doing anything about them? Or are we complacent accomplices to the malaise of our times?*

