

Chapter VI

Chapter VI

In Times of Siege as Historiographic Metafiction

Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* published in 2003 discusses controversial issues of fundamentalism that threatens the freedom of expression in the current scenario. The novel unfolds as an episode for forty six days, thus justifies the title. The title of each chapter is exactly the date and month of the year 2000. The novel begins on 30th August, proceeds throughout September and winds up on 15th October. The entire action revolves around the history of medieval India. This novelist raises apprehension regarding growing fundamentalism and extremism which sabotages the Indian society. The novelist mourns the loss of secularism which is the bed rock of democracy. Alok Rai's relevant remark is a rich tribute to the merit of the novel. He observes, "*In Times of Seige* is not only quite as contemporary as today's newspaper, but tomorrows as well. That is what makes it a literature – i.e. news that stays news – rather than mere journalism."

History is the fountain head of several truths that are long concealed. The postmodern understanding of historiography is influence by poststructuralist ideology. Gertrude Himmelfarb in her article 'Postmodernist History' observes that postmodernism when applied to the field of history, turns into "In history, it is a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past" (156). Postmodern historical novels are based on historical documents, events and historical personages while connecting it at the same time to the present crisis.

Githa Hariharan upholds the impetus created by history with reference to the Basava Movement of the medieval India. The history of Basava is revived by Shiv Murthy who is a fifty year old Professor of History at Kastuba Gandhi Central University.

In Times of Siege, Shiv upholds the virtue of truth and hence he rises to be a hero. Githa Hariharan states:

I finished *When Dreams Travel*, I felt a sense of closure, of completion. I felt the need to shift to a parallel road, which was heading in the same direction. If *The Thousands Faces of Night* is a part of a world I knew intimately in the years of growing up, *In Times of Siege* is a world I know intimately as an adult, as a citizen. It is set in a world I live in. The campus, academic life, the intrigues of communalists and fundamentalists in this setting and the resistance to fundamentalism which is also a part of my life, well beyond any campus. (Navarro 203)

There is a parallelism and close connection between the novelist and the protagonist Shiv Murthy, because the novelist is also a Professor. In an interview with Luna Gaines Githa Hariharan reveals her intention for writing the novel.

More than inspiration, I would have to talk about compulsion. Both in India and elsewhere, we are living in times that allow less and less space for debate and dissent. As far as specific incidents are concerned, when I was midway through the novel, there was actually a case in India of two very eminent historians being attacked for their work by rightwing watchdogs. This was not so much inspiration for me as a strange parallel track being taken by both the reality around me, and the fiction I was writing.

The theme of the novel is the relevance of history and its interpretation in modern times. Linda Hutcheon coined the term 'Historiographic Metafiction'. Linda Hutcheon in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism* labels that works of historiographic metafiction are "those well-known and popular novels which are both extremely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also allege to historical events and personages" (25). Historiographic metafiction is an ideal postmodern art form which makes history more relevant to the present problems.

Patricia Waugh in her book, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, remarks that "metafiction employs intertextual references and citations to fictional systems. It interweaves biographies of imaginary writers. It often violates the traditional narrative techniques by involving the writer with the fictional characters. Metafiction addresses the readers through the first person narrator" (33-40). Fiction that employs historical reconstruction of the past and inter-connects it with the present socio-political scenario has been termed as Historiographic Metafiction. "Literature has always been studied with reference to its origins (historical genesis), than for its own sake," (03) says Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism*.

Historiographic metafiction interrogates and propounds a complex relationship that prevails between fiction and history. The world of fiction and the world of history seem to be mutually contributing and happening. Hutcheon in *Canadian Postmodern* states, "every fiction is a construct and historiographic metafiction is an attempt to create an imaginary historical setting" (20). Historiographic metafiction is deeply rooted in historical, social and political realities.

According to Linda Hutcheon: “[historiographic metafiction] puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real. This is why I have been calling this historiographic metafiction” (“Poetics” 92). Her definition is governed by the paradox created by the intermingling of metafictional self-reflexivity and historical reality in, “novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (“Poetics” 5). A postmodernist theory of history states that though stories foreground certain events, certain facts remain suppressed for some ideological reasons.

Githa Hariharan presents a perfect synthesis of history and fiction to throw light on the impact of the past on the present. The sense of belonging to a community and concept of citizenship are subject to distortions due to violence, hatred and exclusions. History is always a disputed site and always shares a strong background to the Indian cultural landscape.

I was writing about the times we live in, where such things happen, and not only in India. Where you expect them to happen, again and again. It was the first time I wrote a novel as if I was competing with reality. It is not an experience I recommend to any other writer or artist, film maker, journalist, academic or citizen. As I wrote the novel, I also became sharply aware of lines, sometimes clear, sometimes blurred, between real sites and disputed sites. Let me begin with a couple of literal sites-physical structures. On December 6, 1992, the Babri Masjid was demolished.

Since then, there have been many specific sites that have been turned from real, living sites to disputed sites vulnerable to demolition in some way or the other.” (Sahitya Akademi 33)

Githa Hariharan gives an insight into the life of Basava who was a twelfth century philosopher, statesman and a social reformer in the state of Kalyan. He fought against all the inhuman practices of caste system. Through his poetry, known as vachanaas, Basava emphatically stressed the annihilation of the caste system. He worked for the abolition of untouchability; his main objective was to establish a society where people will be treated with dignity. Basava is acknowledged as the forerunner of democracy. He is a fountain head of wisdom who believed that any conflicts in society can be resolved by intellectual meaningful debate rather than by war and violence. Basava is a true visionary who envisioned a society that could flourish based on democratic ideals. Githa Hariharan has presented the case of Professor Shiv Murthy, who had given a factual account of Basवेश्वरा. In her opinion: “But all this is part of history, drawn from a variety of sources, Shiv says part of the challenge of getting to know Basava’s life and times is reconstructing it out of literary texts, legends, inscriptions and other records.” (qtd. In Sidiqii 92)

Basava is believed to be the reincarnation of Buddha as he was empathetic towards underprivileged people and tried to reinstate their lost dignity. Basava believes that a person should gain merit not by his birth but by his conduct in the society. He believed that there should be no demarcation between the countrymen in terms of wealth, position or caste. Basava tried to uplift the entire countrymen morally by asking them to undergo

self-purification in order to break the barriers put forth by the caste system. He insisted that the same rules of conduct apply to the administrators as well as to the individual members of the society.

In Times of Siege covers the span of two months in the life of Shiv Murthy, Professor of History at Kamala Nehru Central University which is an open university. Murthy no longer teaches students but co-ordinates, “resources for his educational clients” (Hariharan, “Times” 4). Two events create a great turmoil in the serene life of Murthy. Shiv Murthy goes to Jamuna Girls’ Hostel of Kamala Nehru University, New Delhi to take his childhood friend’s daughter, Meena home. Meena fractured her leg while getting off a bus. Shiv, the local guardian of Meena, visits her and decides to take her to his home. Meena is a student of Sociology, pursuing research on women affected by the anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi’s assassination in 1984. Murthy stays away from her and all the amenities at home are provided by his maid since she arrived. Murthy’s wife Rekha is in America, with their daughter Tara, he is left all alone to take care of Meena.

The event that carries strong overtones in the life of Murthy is the controversy raised by a group of people regarding the course material he had prepared for one of his B.A. History course. Murthy wrote about Basava the treasurer of the twelfth century Hindu city, Kalyana. Basava disseminated egalitarian ideals and envisioned a society based on equality without caste or class differences. Certain Hindu fundamentalists felt that Basava’s ideas as reflected by Prof. Shiv Murthy in his course material threatened the order of the day, especially the caste system. In an interview Githa Hariharan

commented thus: “The narrative technique in *In Times of Siege* is: for me, a point of departure, but I think I have been heading towards it for a while. I think the next few works will, in fact, stay on this path and move further ahead.” (Navarro -Tejero 203)

Prof. Shiv goes to his university and his colleagues are gathered in the Head of the Department, Dr. Sharma’s room for attending a meeting. “The head, Dr. Sharma, is a timid man whose head is just a little too big for his slight, finely sculpted body. His idea of paradise would be a place where the inmates proceed solemnly from one meeting to another. He is now realized for his role in his own corner of paradise: presiding, unbearably grave and pompous” (Hariharan, “Times” 15). The Head of the Department rather than doing anything new and innovative keeps his department active with continuous meetings and discussions.

Dr. Arya recently received his Ph.D. degree and he is a self-proclaimed erudite Professor of History. “It is difficult to take Arya seriously. To see Arya as academic Or Arya as the enemy-in- training. To believe in Arya, the historian” (Hariharan, “Times” 17). Dr. Arya creates troubles for other and always interferes into the other’s matters. Dr. Menon is in-charge of Modern India course. Dr. Menon is, “A thin taciturn man with a heap of curls on his head and a lush beard. All this hair and clothes he wears-always a couple of size too big for him-are part of his camouflage system” (Hariharan, “Times” 18). Dr. Menon always lives in his own world, completely cut off from the world outside. Amita Sen is Prof. Shiv’s only lady colleague, who feels isolated and lonely. She shares a good friendship with Shiv.

At the meeting, Dr. Arya complains against Dr. Menon to the Head of the Department, for unscrupulous editing of part one of the modules of Modern India. Dr. Menon tells

them that course module has disgusting remarks regarding a minority community.

Dr. Sharma is also quite hopeful that the matter will be resolved shortly.

One day while watching TV, he is informed through a phone call by a reporter of the newspaper 'Current' that he has written something controversial regarding the life of a great south Indian poet Basava and there is great turmoil among the public as his lesson has hurt the sentiments of certain section of people for treating the philosophy of Basava with disrespect.

Prof. Shiv treats this as a rumour and ignores it, he thinks that his course material on a medieval poet Basava cannot hurt the sentiments of people. Head of the Department, Dr. Sharma informs Shiv, "Your lesson on Basavanna's movement for social reform has been leaked somehow to the press. And apparently there is a certain lack of clarity in the lesson-anyway, the lesson has hurt the sentiments of a Hindu watchdog group. You know our policy is to steer clear of controversy" (Hariharan, "Times" 53). The Dean and the Head of the Department have received angry, abusive letters for this lesson from a group called Itihas Surkasha Manch which starts protesting against the lesson and created a huge controversy among the public. Dr. Sharma remarks:

It seems that you have implied that Basavanna's city, Kalyana was, not a model Hindu kingdom. It seems you have not exaggerated the problem of caste and written in a very biased way about the Brahmins and temple priests. And also you have not made it clear enough that Basava was much more than ordinary human being. There are people who consider him divine . . . There is a rumour that you have gone on leave because the lesson has got you into trouble . . . Well, Shiv, we will have to act swiftly

to stop this growing into a controversy. A full apology or retraction from you will be the best— we can decide what to call it so that it is not embarrassing for the department— for you of course. And we may have to send instructions to our entire study centre to discontinue use of the booklet that contains this module. May be we will have to decide to reprint without the lesson. (Hariharan, “Times” 53-54)

Prof. Shiv slowly realizes the intensity of the situation only after listening to the remarks of Head of the Department about the lesson.

He tells Meena that he has written a lesson on Basavanna or Basava, a south Indian saint poet and social reformer. He has made impartial and unprejudiced assessment of Basava as a statesman, saint and philosopher, based on his own knowledge and observation of history and culture. But a certain section of society feels offended by the lesson because he has not made “the heroes heroic enough” (Hariharan, “Times” 55).

About the lesson Prof. Shiv remarks: “It seems I have not sung enough of a paean to the glory Hindu kingdoms; and that I make too much of caste divisions among Hindus . . . The protection of history! Whoever heard of history having to be protected?” (Hariharan, “Times” 55).

Meena the young girl with revolutionary spirit tells him very strictly that he should never surrender to the demands of fundamentalists; instead he should work out a plan of action to fight against such dividing forces in the society. Next morning Shiv goes

to meet the Dean at his office, where his Head of the Department is already discussing about the provocative lesson written by him. On being asked by the Dean about the contentious issues in his course material Prof. Shiv explains:

The lesson is part of the module for the medieval Indian history paper, which carries three credits. Since the medieval period is my area, I preferred not to commission an outside expert to write the module. Though Basava is so many things, so many people rolled into one— poet and mystic, finance minister and political activist, man of the people and man of god— the lesson itself is quite straightforward. It traces the life of Basava. The growth of his radical ideas and his struggle against caste divisions and the temple establishment, the tensions that grew between the court and the realized and the merchants on the one hand, on the other, the low-caste artisans and the untouchables who made up a large part of Basava's veerashaiva movement. The lesson ends with the crisis these tensions led to, and the dispersal of Basava's follower; and his own departure from Kalyana and his death shortly after. (Hariharan, "Times"67)

Prof. Shiv finds an opportunity to explain to the Dean and tries to win his confidence that whatever he has written is based on historical evidences as he has attached proofs as footnotes at the end of his lesson to support his views and cause. He asserted that anyone who has some doubts and objections, regarding his version and projection of Basava's story, can refer the endnotes as it proves that the course material is based on factual evidences. He tried to prove that he has not made any assumptions based on the long-cherished

cultural beliefs, myths and folklores. The Head of the Department convinces Shiv after scrutinizing his lesson carefully; he has listed certain sentences that are ambiguous leading to misinterpretation of his lesson. He lists the objections as follows:

One: Backward-looking. Two: Contradictory account of Basava's life, conflicting narratives. Three: Birth legends fabricated. Four: Called a bigoted revolutionary by temple priests. Also called, a dangerous man, a threat to structure, stability and religion. Five: The comfort of faith was not enough for Basava. Six: There were rumours that Basava used money from the royal treasury to look after his followers. Seven: The lines of social division in the great city of Kalyana were sharply drawn. Caste was a dominating factor. Eight: There was tension between brahmanical religious orthodoxy and the popular religious reformers and saint-poet. Nine: Basava met and could have been influenced the 'mad men from Persia', the dancing, drinking Sufis. Ten: Bijjala, the King of Kalyana, was pressured by the leaders to commit atrocities on low-caste devotees. Basava told the King a series of tales in which devotees especially untouchable devotees, were shown to be superior to be realized. (Hariharan, "Times" 68)

Dr. Sharma briefs to Prof. Shiv about the three demands of ItihasSurakasha Manch, a group of self-proclaimed protectors of history. Dr. Sharma says:

The Manch has three demands. The first is an apology for hurting their sentiments. They want separate apologies from Dr. Murthy and from the department, by extension the university. Second, the lesson should be retracted and the material recalled from all students registered for the

course, and from study centres and libraries. Third, the rewritten lesson should be submitted to the Manch before it is sent to our printing unit.

(Hariharan, "Times" 69)

After listening to these awful demands of the Manch, the Dean gets angry and considers the demands of the Manch as an attempt to defame history. Dr. Sharma, wants to "steer clear of controversy" doesn't want "to get into debates and controversies-however fascinating, however historically permissible-if the student don't need these or appreciate them" (Hariharan, "Times" 70). Prof. Shiv after listening to all these discussions asserts, boldly: "The lesson does not distort history by any stretch of the imagination. And I will not apologize or explain myself to a group outside the university, a group of people we do not recognize as historians" (Hariharan, "Times" 70). At home, Meena welcomes Prof. Murthy with newspapers clipping and a postcard sent to him unanimously. There is an article published in a newspaper 'Current' that reads:

Who Will Teach The Teacher?

Protest against Prof's Distortion of History 15 September, New Delhi.

A senior of Professor of History at Kasturba Gandhi Central University (KGU) in New Delhi has been charged with distorting facts and introducing an ideological bias into a lesson in the university's medieval Indian history course. (Hariharan, "Times" 75).

The Itihas Surakasha Manch, an independent organization, issued a statement on Wednesday in the capital calling for "an end to tampering with our precious and glorious Indian history" (Hariharan, "Times" 76). The statement, signed by one of the organization

leaders, Mr. Anant Tripathi, said, “We will not allow history to be polluted like this. Fifty years after independence, we cannot have Indian historians brainwashed by foreign theories and methods depriving us of our pride in Hindu temples and priests” (Hariharan, “Times” 76). Retired Professor Shri A. A. Atre, extended his support to the Manch and commented thus,

To say that the saint Basava may have died “in broken, disillusioned exile” is as much a mischievous distortion of history as to say that he may have learnt anything from the Muslim Sufis of Persia. Sad to say, there seem to be scholars with vested interests who think the treasures of our past can be taken away from us. The KGU historian, Professor Shiv Murthy, has gone on leave since the protest began. He refused to confirm whether the university had asked him to go on leave or whether he will resign from the department. He also claimed to be unaware of the furore caused by his text. On the question of the historian’s responsibility to society, his response was a terse ‘No comment.’ (Hariharan, “Times” 77)

Meena encourages Shiv to confront the religious fanatics. Meena takes the help of her friend Amar, Jyoti and Manzar. Amar is a social activist and a committed member of several citizens’ groups. This identity helps Amar to bring these issues to the notice of various citizens’ group. Meena and her friends try to struggle against religious extremism by obtaining support from various sections of society such as academicians, political leaders, lawyers and social workers. This attempt attracts the interest of the media and this controversy spreads far and wide like wildfire and gradually gains momentum.

Rekha Shiv's wife becomes very much worried about Shiv when she happens to watch news on TV channels. A TV channel, 'Newslight' arranges Professor Shiv's interview, on being asked regarding his distortion of historical facts, he clarifies: "The important thing to remember . . . is that history like the human mind is a very complex body with many strands. Ours is rich, pluralistic history. Of course all these threads must be repeatedly re-examined" (Hariharan, "Times" 97).

Professor Shiv is more inspired to write a lesson on Basava's philosophy which is akin to the principles of his father who was a freedom fighter. The lasting memory of his deceased father guides him and motivates him from time to time whenever he needs his guidance to proceed further with the complex issues of life. And it is his father's memory that motivates him for writing the module on Basava. On one occasion his father remarked: "Shiv . . . if you want to get hold of something and learn all about it, know it, it does not matter whether that something is in past or present all that matters is that you are freethinking that you have moral courage" (Hariharan, "Times" 40). Thus, his father becomes a beacon of light to Shiv, who feels his omnipresence whenever he is in need.

A faculty meeting is convened at the department, where Dr. Arya speaks in favour of the Manch, "The Manch represents public sentiments. History and everything else should respect this. For years leftist and pseudo-secular historians have been filling committees with their agents. Now their monopoly is over and they are making hue and cry" (Hariharan, "Times" 126). Prof. Shiv is informed that his lesson has been sent to an expert committee for an impartial review. Itihas Suraksha Manch leader, Anant Tripathi observes:

Texts which over emphasize caste divisions and project the Hindu religion and Hindu culture in a poor light should not be allowed. Such conspiracies to tarnish the image of the Indian past should be met with courage. People feel free to revile Hinduism with impunity, but they do not dare criticize Islam because then the swords would be out. (Hariharan, “Times” 99-100)

Meena advises Shiv to take the help of his colleagues, and she thinks that they should extend their support to him at this crucial time. The strategy of the protestors is to, “convince people that they are under attack, then offer them protection” (Hariharan, “Times” 99). In the meantime, Dr. Menon informs Prof. Shiv that his room, at the department, has been ransacked and furniture is broken. His nameplate has been thrown on the floor in a heap of litter. Prof. Shiv is being searched by the extremists for offending their sentiments.

Amid such strong protest, Shiv feels:

Like a body that has been taken over. A body in a lawless country, a body that has somehow unlearned the law of gravity. There is a sense of surging ahead of careening; of the wheel having taken over from the hand steering it. Every now and then he braces himself and waits: any moment now the tyres will skid everything will go out of control. The whole world, all of life, blurs into frenetic movement till the crash seems, by comparison, pure mercy. (Hariharan, “Times” 131)

Amar, Meena’s friend, organizes a protest rally, where the supporters of Prof. Shiv, along with his colleagues, Dr. Menon and Dr. Amita and a bus full of students from Meena’s University, all gathered, distributing hand outs and pamphlets against fundamentalism.

There are people holding placards, shouting slogans such as “Stop TALIBANIZATION OF INDIA”, “HISTORY DESTROYED!”, “WHOSE AFRAID OF THE MANCH?” (Hariharan, “Times” 145).

The situation in the university is tense because of the protests, angry speeches, meetings, rallies, shouting of slogans by the supporters of the Manch on one side, and on the other the supporters of Prof. Shiv. People from all strata of society join hands with fundamentalism as well as liberalism. Organizations like, Secular Women Against Patriarchy (SWAP), Forum Against Hindu Terrorism (FAHT), Peoples Association of Secular Scientists (PASS), join hands with each other to support Prof. Shiv Murthy. The daily routine of Professor Shiv Murthy and Meena turns very hectic as they try clarifying their views on history and its interpretations.

Shiv is losing count of interviews, meetings, telephone calls. Meena has forgotten about her itchy knee. She sits in her bed, phone in hand, a general on the battlefield direction operations. The occasional awkward silence that would sit between them in the early days is now filled; they have more than enough to talk about, all safe subjects (Hariharan, “Times” 117).

Prof. Shiv and Meena both realize that they too have become like militants, the part of an army, making headway against these fundamentalist forces. Commenting upon the theme of the novel, Sarita Prabhakar remarks, “In the novel, there are other real-life stories taken from contemporary life which run parallel to the main narrative and further emphasize the insidious role of the communal forces” (69). Amar reminds them about the incidents like Campaigns against Christians, the murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two children, the attack on artist M. F. Hussain for painting

Hindu Goddesses nude, blackening of faces of teachers in Goa for setting “politically incorrect exams” (Hariharan, “Times” 100) and the recall of a volume on the freedom struggle, the disruption of shooting of a film on the plight of Hindu widows in Benaras. These examples show how freedom of expression has been suppressed by these extremists. Githa Hariharan expresses her views in an interview with Gowri Ramnarayan thus:

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 is a temple, but the problem begins when they come up with an ‘authorised’ 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. Every time there is a pretext that India had a glorious, golden homogenous world, we can say what about caste, caste, caste, just like Basava did it. 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 pained by his "adherents", who hold a world view antithetical to everything he believed in.

Thus, like Basava, Prof. Shiv also stands firm for truth, honesty and integrity. Prof. Shiv feels an intense pressure and has to overcome complex psychological conflict. "He is an academic; he argues not some rabble-activist. He is a Professor after all, not a two inch newspaper column hero. Basava's man is ready with his rejoinder. Why pretend you are as professor if you can't stand up to someone, telling you what to think? How to think?" (Hariharan, "Times" 64). Dr. Menon also informs Prof. Shiv regarding a similar controversy that existed with a play published in 1986, prescribed as a textbook, created tension in society and it was withdrawn from the university syllabus. The extremist forces accused the play for portraying Basava as an ordinary human being "as a coward; implying that he committed suicide; casting aspersions on the 'chastity' of some women; and letting some characters use obscene language" (Hariharan, "Times" 109-110). The play was withdrawn from the university syllabus by a government order. The Vice-Chancellor of the University, in a television interview, says that he is going to form a committee to look into the matter of vandalism on the university campus. He speaks out his responsibility of promising a campus free of violence and hostility.

Shiv's mind and heart are very much intact, but he still feels the fear of an endangered species whose natural habitat has been taken over. His savaged room: even its memory, the imagined memory of its ruin suggests that all hope—of pretending it did not happen, that such a thing could not happen—is an allusion. Shiv's room in the university has been left in shambles, shards

of glass and splinters of wood mingling with the remains of his books and files. The spaces vandals have pillaged and violated lie across the vast stretches of history, doomed to desolation. And what difference now, in the ruins of memory between Vijaynagar and his university room?

(Hariharan, "Times"150-51)

Shiv's daughter Tara from the USA says to Shiv, "It's sort of weird and embarrassing to explain why you have written something against our temples and priests all that. It's only after coming to the US that many of us have learnt to appreciate Indian tradition" (Hariharan, "Times"112). Tara thinks that her father has mentioned something derogatory against Indian culture. She feels that Indian culture is an epitome of spirituality with rich mythology, so questioning these beliefs is inappropriate. Meena thinks that these beliefs should be analyzed and discussed and authentic truth should be brought to the purview of the public. Prof. Shiv's wife Rekha advises him not to go against the fundamentalists. She reminds Shiv that he should not forget that he is "dealing with hoodlums who have pulled down mosques and churches that have stood for so many years. They've engineered riots; for god's sake what's a little violence to them? Any they are so powerful now" (Hariharan, "Times" 155).

The Ithihas Suraksha Manch had made the public believe that Prof. Shiv has falsified and degraded the sacred image of Basava. Anything that is written against the public sentiments, invites trouble but he is neither disheartened nor ready to compromise upon authentic historical facts. Shiv is provided with a security guard by the university, who lives in Prof. Shiv's compound and constantly makes note of the visitors. There is an article about Dr. Murthy that reads:

About thirty young men claiming to be students took the university authorities by surprise when they stormed into the History Department on Thursday afternoon. The incident has been ‘explained’ by the Itihas Suraksha Manch as ‘a spontaneous protest by students against the distortion of heroic historical figures and the anti-Hindu bias’ of a lesson on medieval history written by the professor in question. (Hariharan, “Times”169)

In spite of strong protests, Prof. Shiv Murthy becomes even more determined to face the fundamentalists. He is very adamant and obstinate not to change his views. As the time rolls on the violent storm of protest diminishes by degrees.

The papers, the TV, the university, the Manch, Amar’s band of saviours—all seem to have forgotten the notorious professor, along with the glories of Kalyana’s temples and the truth about Basava’s life and death. Both supporters and opponents have either been stunned into silence or sated by the most recent acts of violence. (Hariharan, “Times”181)

Meena’s leg is healed and she starts walking. Amar comes to Meena to take her back to her hostel. The novel ends with the departure of Meena to her hostel as she has completely recovered and could walk without the help of the crutches. And finally, while ending the novel, Githa Hariharan writes:

Even Shiv, despite a long record of lost opportunities has found his way to the brink; from where he can if he dares, make the necessary leap off the precipice. He has used his father’s memory like a walking stick en route to this first time risk-taking venture. It is Meena who put this stick in his hand again, coaxed his limping legs in the direction he knew—better than

she—must be taken. Now the stick is superfluous that is what Meena and her unlikely allies in contingency, his father, Basava, and the thought-policing touts of Itihas Suraksha Manch have forced Shiv to see. Once he throws away all safe crutches he can truly in the present. Be free to be curious, to speculate; to debate, dissent. Reaffirm the value of the only heirloom he needs from the past, the right to know a thing in all the ways possible.

(Hariharan, “Times” 194)

The novel reveals an amalgamation of various kinds of social issues surfacing in the novel. The most prominent conflict emerging in the novel is between fundamentalism and liberalism which becomes the crux of this novel. Fundamentalism is nothing but a projection and staunch belief in old, rigid and orthodox conventions of religion whereas liberalism supports unbiased, unprejudiced thinking. Fundamentalism, in this novel, is represented by Itihas Suraksha Manch, led by its fanatic leader, Anant Tripathi, while liberalism is represented by Prof. Shiv Murthy.

The novel looks unflinchingly into the ugliness of ideological polarization and sectarian conflict that has permeated every facet of life in India in recent years resulting in the shrinkage of space for free expression and debate. To make her point Githa Hariharan has juxtaposed two ages, the Virsaiva Movement and the sixteenth century routing of Vijay Nagar Empire with the current rise of fundamentalism forming the subtexts in the novel. This goes on to establish both continuities and discontinuities between the past and present. (Prabhakar 67)

Prof. Shiv Murthy's course module on Basava, a saint poet, has landed him in trouble. His lesson on Basava has created a furor in society because of his controversial portrayal of Basava's life. Basava has been revered as a saint and a great social reformer. Basava's ideology which propounded equality at all levels in the society had been a source of inspiration to upcoming generations. Basava had dedicated his life for uplifting the untouchables and down-trodden. Regarding the controversies relating to Basava's life, A. K. Ramanujan remarks:

The biography of Basavanna has many contradictory sources: controversial edicts, deifying accounts by Virsaiva followers, poetic life-histories, pejorative accounts by his Jaina opponents mentioned in the vacans of contemporary and later saints. Basavanna was a political activist and social reformer, minister to a king in a troubled century; it is not surprising that he should have been praised as a prophet by followers and condemned as zealot and conspirator by his enemies, of whom he had many. (43)

Prof. Shiv has given a convincing portrayal of Basava's life based on historical documents and archaeological surveys. So instead on being misled by various traditional, oral narratives regarding Basava's life, he puts forward authentic reflections of Basava's life, contrary to the prevalent beliefs regarding Basava. But his version of Basava's life has not been accepted by some fundamentalist groups, as these groups think that Prof. Shiv has soiled the God-like image of Basava. Itihas Surakasha Manch, on behalf of fundamentalists and bigots, starts protesting furiously against Prof. Shiv and demands a written apology along with the submission of his re-written lesson to the Manch for its

proper evaluation. But at the same time public not only support Prof. Shiv but also start a campaign supporting Prof. Shiv and secularism. In one of her interviews with the Deccan Herald, Githa Hariharan expresses her inspiration for writing this novel:

As a writer, and more importantly as a citizen who has high stakes in the society I live in, I have been very much part of various movements. Over the last several years, along with a lot of several other writers, artists, filmmakers, I have felt very strongly that we are travelling in a direction that is deeply regressive, and both as a citizen and a writer I have felt that I must take this head on, and that was the general background that was going on in my head more specifically, in 1999, after my last novel *When Dreams Travel* came out, as I was mulling over all these things, I broke my knee and was laid up in bed for weeks together. It was a good time to actually think about how I would construct this novel, how I would take up an issue that I was not only interested in but also living through. And so I began writing. I was midway through my novel, when to my shock I found that eminent historians Sarkar and Paniker had their volume on the freedom struggle called. In fact I had to stop writing for a few weeks because it was almost as if the media coverage and the kind of historians' fear was both similar yet different from my fictional situation. (Kalaivani 65)

Githa Hariharan has employed the postmodern technique of *Histriographic metafiction*. She blends the history of Basava as a parallel to the present day social conflict. Historical writing always demands objectivity. Factual analysis has to be strictly maintained for historical analysis. Romila Thapar remarks, "Historians are responsible for the interpretations

because they're the ones who're interpreting it. The evidence doesn't speak by itself. The historian has to make the evidence speak and so what one's listening to is the historian making the evidence speak" (58).

The novel foregrounds the conflict between myth and reality. "With a confidence that would be the envy of any historian, their press release says: Our Basavanna was a great man sent to earth by Siva himself to do his work among men. There was no question of whether he would succeed or fail, so where is the question of his dying alone in exile. Anyone who refuses to see this must be punished" (qtd. in Siddiqui 95). Prof. Shiv has tried to project reality concealed in the traditional myths. According to myth, it was believed that Basava is the incarnation of Lord Shiva's bull. Popular belief is that Basava possessed powers to perform miracles by curing diseases. According to historical documents, Basava openly revolted against the caste system of his society. Prof. Shiv does not consider Basava as a symbol of divinity, but considers him as a real historical figure. He concentrates and focuses only on Basava's contribution to his state and society as a statesman rather than his spiritual or divine life which has led to variegated narratives. While Basava is regarded as sacrosanct in society, Prof. Shiv focuses on Basava's social reforms which have been misinterpreted by the religious fanatics. While commenting upon the conflict in the novel, Sarita Prabhakar remarks:

As a historian and professor, Shiv had made an attempt to disentangle the reality from the myth. What he has emphasized was that Basava was not "a cardboard saint singing syrupy sweet devotional songs, only concerned with hereafter." He was a social reformer and a thinker who examined everything that was traditionally 'sanctioned'. He questions the idea of

‘the Hindu’ world as being a homogenous whole and protested against all kinds of discriminations. He gathered around him a number of social revolutionaries known as veershaivas warriors of Shiva and the movement came to be known as virsaiva movement. Together with them, he attempted to experiment with a community that ‘sought to excluded no one’, a community in which ‘cross currents could co-exist’, in which ‘rapids and the most placid of waters were fellow realized’. The movement wrought a social upheaval and the city of Kalyana was ultimately burnt. But Basava and his companions left a legacy, a legacy Shiv is now heir to it but in very different way he would have liked to believe that it is Basava who links the year 1168 and 2000 but he is realized to see that “it is not the dissident leader who is the critical link but the same hate mongers, the same manches that have sprouted in two times, centuries apart.” (66)

The external conflict is between the two disparate ideologies; fundamentalism versus liberalism. The conflict between historical fact and contemporary belief is evident as Prof.Shiv’s version of Basava’s life clashes with the mythical version of Basava’s life which is popular among the public. History is the study of events and people of the past. The study of Prof. Shiv Murthy on Basava, in contemporary times, is based on his own research and exploration of historical evidences. Only a subjective and fictitious historical version which has been known to people for centuries is accepted by society. This conflict between history and myth becomes more complex as history demands objectivity and impartial assessment of historical events.

Prof. Shiv's internal conflict springs up in the form of the dilemma that he faces as a Professor and as a historian. His internal conflict surfaces when he faces total isolation as a reputed academician amidst his colleagues. In the eyes of society, he is regarded as a knowledgeable Professor of a prestigious university, but in spite of being an erudite Professor, he is unable to express his views freely because of the fundamentalists such as the Itihas Suraksha Manch. The ever growing extremism and fundamentalism have suppressed his freedom of expression; as the hard core extremists insist that only with their approval the course material should be included in the syllabus. Githa Hariharan comments upon curtailing free expression as a result of the division in the society based on religious fanaticism in the novel:

History, its layered terrain of past mastering into present, shrinks to the size of a module, a black-and-white booklet of lessons. Then that goes. There is only a lone orphaned atom left behind, a sullen, impoverished particle of knowledge. The world and its multitudinous mysteries are reduced to precarious survival on a crude see saw; saint versus leader, saint versus man. Golden Age versus Dark Ages. Hindu versus Muslim, Hindu versus Christian, anti-Hindu, pro- Hindu. Secularist, soft Hindu, rabid Hindu. (Hariharan, "Times"150)

Historiography employs historical personages and events as inter-textual elements. Historiographic metafiction refers to the writings that connects the past with the presents and emphasizes the potent force of past history in structuring our present beliefs. In this novel Githa Hariharan documents the manner in which Prof. Shiv struggles to uphold

authenticity as an historian and the effect history has in impinging upon the ideological stronghold among the public in the present society. In an interview with Luna Gaines, Githa Hariharan opines that,

Githa Hariharan: I am very interested in what makes the ordinary person take a stand - whether in a small way or otherwise. In other words, the almost invisible heroics of day-to-day life. So finally, when Shiv takes a stand, it may not make a difference to anyone but himself. But there is a difference - because he reclaims. Both as an individual and as part of a group, the values he grew up with. (3)

The novelist insists that in a democracy free thinking must be encouraged. The novel focuses upon the intolerance that exists in the society. "What makes fanatic? A Fundamentalist? What makes communities that have lived together? For years suddenly discover a latent hatred for each other?"(Hariharan, "Times"129). The impact of rising religious fanaticism is reflected in their interference in the academia. When Prof.Shiv received a memo from the Vice Chancellor, he felt thus:

It is like looking at an image where the photographer has made a deliberate choice of depth of field. History in the foreground-what happened recently in Shiv's university room, for example is entirely out of focus. The letter does not contain a single word about what the 'unfortunate incident is'. The ransacking Shiv's room is clearly a footnote, a minor by-product of divisive consequences what really matters- the unfortunate incident sharply in focus in the background is still the original sin that his lesson,

his words, invited an unwelcome spotlight, the hired colours of Scandal and controversy and politics into the university. (Hariharan, “Times” 185-1 86)

Githa Hariharan perceives that history is being misused by narrow minded opportunists who kindle riots and clashes. A healthy society should welcome new progressive ideas. Though history is a body of knowledge based on facts, yet history itself shows us that attempts to rectify it have all too often been camouflaged. Githa Hariharan has commented about her own philosophy of history thus:

Separating history and myth, pulling apart history and legend, deciding which chunks of history will keep the myth earth bound, which slivers of myth will cast light and insight, on dull historical fragments. The two have to be torn apart, their links disentangled, to see who is who then coaxed into embrace again to understand the composite reality. Approaching the whole, the heterogeneous truth that demands the coupling of conflicting narratives, requires the participation of one body. (Hariharan, “Times”87)

Writers have a powerful weapon in their hands which they use for the progress of the country. This novel is a progressive criticism against communal fascist forces. Certain religious fanatics who use history as a means to instill hatred should be checked. It is a prophetic work which depicts the present day violation of human rights. India is a country that encompasses pluralistic vision where a world of different origins, nationality and backgrounds live in perfect harmony. The novel *In Times of Siege* concludes with the message that the basic human rights must be protected. The novelist has used the Historiographic metafiction to show that the thread of history entwined deeper in the society.

Admittedly, the writing has been undertaken for the purpose of stating a message. Political statements can be made in different ways, and a novel is a way of reaching out to a wider audience. It is about the perils of being a liberal in degenerated times. The world, which collapses so abruptly around Shiv, is the world we see coming apart in India today: the polarization is total, and the divide absolute. To be in liberal is asking for trouble, to try and teach the values of liberalization might cost you your life. (Singh 98)

Consequently, Githa Hariharan has deftly woven historical facts and related with myth into the structure of the novel. The theme of the novel blends history and fiction, politics and culture such that it reflects social reality wherein the stronghold of secularism is shattered by extremists. The novel insists that people with patriotic spirit must stand against the separatist forces in the society that try to fabricate the secular ideals of the country. The determination with which the university students take centre stage in the demonstrations against the fundamentalists shows that the youth of the nation are positively attuned to the democratic ideals of the country.