

## Academic Autonomy in ‘In Times of Siege’

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### Abstract:

This paper aims at highlighting the plea for academic autonomy expressed through the transformation of the novel’s protagonist, Dr.Shivamurthy, a Professor of history at Kasturba Gandhi Central University, from an ordinary man to a hero. Githa Hariharan, being a champion in advocating for the weaker section of the society handled a unique plot in her novel ‘In Times of Siege’. She has portrayed the plight of the history Professor, who faces the extreme protest from the fundamentalist against his lesson on 12<sup>th</sup> century hindu saint poet reformer, Basavana. The story revolves around how the protagonist faces the wrath of the protesters, with the help of another prominent character of the novel, Meena. Meena comes to Shiv Murthy’s house to get healed of her broken leg, as he is her local guardian. Later when Shiv is left alone to face the challenge, she raises to the occasion and stands as a pillar of strength. She mends the broken heart of Shivamurthy, whenever he is broken and leaves him as an independent person, who can handle pressure on his own.

**Key words:** transformation, plight, fundamentalist, wrath of protesters, pillar of strength

### Dr. Shivamurthy – a History Professor

Dr. Shivamurthy is a 52 year old history Professor at Kasturba Gandhi Open University (KGU). His wife Rehka, presently lives with her daughter Tara, who is software engineer working in USA. As he works in the Open University, he does not conduct classes or has got a direct access to the students. He has been allotted the work of preparing a lesson for B.A. correspondence students. As he writes for the unknown students, with whom he cannot discuss or explain facts, he always feels more responsible in preparing lessons by doing complete research on history. In her Novel, In Times of Seige, Githa Hariharan has taken a learned Professor as her protagonist to show how the academia suffers in the hands of fundamentalists.

Deepak Kumar Singh says “The novel addresses the topical problem of our time, the politics of caste-division and intolerance and aggressiveness of fundamentalist Hindu organization” (107)

The novel opens with the introduction of the protagonist and guardian of Meena, Mr. Shivamurthy driving in to the Kamala Nehru University to bring Meena home from the university hostel. Meena is his college mate’s daughter. Meena is a sociology student of KNU, who is working on her thesis on the pathetic status of women during anti-Sikh riot, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. She is a bold and courageous girl who involves herself in various social welfare activities, along with her college friends. Meena hurt her leg very badly, when she tried to get down from a bus. One of her legs is badly broken and she is asked to take bed rest as she has a cast on her leg. Shivamurthy was called by the hostel management to take his ward home. Shivamurthy has hardly spoken with her, as he met her very occasionally during her visits to his home with Rehka. Shivamurthy brings Meena home and the reading room in the ground floor is allotted for Meena to stay, as she could not move from the bed. Shivamurthy is the only companion to Meena, other than Kamala, his servant maid who lives in the outhouse with her family. Realizing that Meena cannot be on her own and she may be in need of assistance most of the time, Shivamurthy decides to put leave for few days. He goes to University to apply leave and brings few materials home, as he needs to prepare a lesson on Vijaya Nagar Empire.

Shivamurthy receives a call from a correspondent of the paper called, the Current. The person enquires him regarding his controversial lesson on Basavana in B.A. history module and further interrogates whether the protest against the lesson has made him to avail leave. He got thoroughly confused and without answering him anything he cut the call. He is terribly upset with the comment on his leave, as he does not aware of anything about the protest that has started against his lesson. Later he receives a call from Dr. Sharma, his colleague. He tells him that the lesson on Basavana has got leaked to the press and it has instigated the group called Itihas Suraksha Manch to go on protest. He further added that the head of the department and the dean are getting several abusive letters regarding the lesson on Basavana. Itihas Suraksha Manch claims that

We will not allow our history to be polluted like this. Fifty years after independence, we cannot have Indian historians brain washed by foreign theories

and methods depriving us of our pride in Hindu temples and priest. (Hariharan, 76)

### **Basavana – an egalitarian.**

Basavana is regarded as a mystic saint poet of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and he is ascribed with divine qualities. Hindus worship him as saint poet. Actually Basavana is a finance minister to the king Bijala, the ruler of twelfth century city Kalyana. Basava has earned great respect from his people with his charismatic power. He is a man of good heart, who loves his fellow human being very much. His dream is to create a classless society, which he names it as a democratic society, where everyone is treated equally irrespective of their status, caste and creed. He was the founder of the movement Veersaivism and the followers are called as 'Veershaivas'. In line with this, he encourages inter caste marriages, to eliminate caste system and conducted a marriage by heading the event. This event has fuelled the caste adhered people and the issue is taken to the king. The king got furious and declared the marriage to be unacceptable. He further ordered to kill the bride's father and the bridegroom. This instigated the violence between veershaivas and conservative people. The riot resulted in the murder of the king and burning of the town, Kalyana. Disappointed with this event, Basavana left the kingdom and his later life is unknown. It is believed that he lived in a place near river, where three rivers meet and his death is still mystery.

### **The controversy & reactions**

Shivamurthy has prepared a lesson on Basavana objectively, without adding any kind of distortions. He projected Basavana as a person, who stood for creating the classless society, otherwise called as an egalitarian society. This fact has disturbed the sentiments of the Itihas group, who hails the period of Basavana (12<sup>th</sup> century) as a golden age in the history. They believed that Kalyana Kingdom stood as an ideal model of government, where everyone is treated equally and job opportunities were provided in abundant. Basavana was considered and worshipped as a saint poet of the century, who is elevated above the level of the human being. Hence Shivamurthy's faithful portrayal of Basavana's period has shaken the basic belief of the fundamentalist group.

It seems you have implied that Basavanna's city, kalyana, was not a model Hindu kingdom. It seems you have exaggerated the problem of caste and written in a

very biased way about the bhramins and temple priest. And also you have not made it clear enough that Basavana was much more than an ordinary human being. There are people who consider him divine, you know. (Hariharan, 54)

Itihas group could not accept the fact that the caste and inequality were prevalent in the Kalyana kingdom and Basavana fought against the evil practices of the period. They denied admitting the fact that Basavana went in exile after the city was put on fire as a result of riot. This has reduced Basavana to mortal from the divine qualities, which irritated the group further. They considered Shivamurthy to be a traitor, who distorts the history to benefit some cause. So they claimed

If you want to rewrite Indian history with our Hindu saints as coward and failures in exile, why not go to Pakistan and do it? They will welcome you and give you all attention and praise you are desperate for (Hariharan, 77-78)

As an intolerant group over the portrayal of Basvana as a person went on exile, Itihas keeps two condition to the university. One is to withdraw the lesson on Basavana from the syllabus and secondly they demand the open apology from Shivamurthy. Shivamurthy is called for a meeting in the department which is headed by the head of the department along with other colleagues. From the meeting proceedings Shivamurthy understand that the issue is raised by Mr. Arya, who is a part of a religious group. The issue is opened diplomatically by the head by highlighting that Academicians should be aware of the people's sentiments and the same must be inculcated when we prepare a lesson, which is to be circulated to the young minds. He further added that historians should be more careful when they prepare lessons, as it can distort and alter the past glory of the nation. When he was taken to Dean for further enquiry, the same thing is repeated. Dean also feels that academicians should not trigger the emotions of the people and disturb the peaceful existence of the society. Both Dean and Head are in their verge of their retirement so they don't want to take any risk which may bring them troubles. Hence they want to play a safe game.

The Head and the Dean are non-committal, weak, worldly, practical and successful types of academicians. They are always ready to make compromises whenever a crisis confronts them. They have a smooth, 'play it safe' style of functioning. The Vice-Chancellor is a comic relief. The way he twists and turn the questions asked to him by the media persons is quite enjoyable. He beat about the bush, speaks

endlessly without actually saying anything. Hariharan has beautifully drawn a caricature of the Vice-Chancellor. (Deepak, 127)

### **Shivamurthy – a true historian**

Shivamurthy feels left alone as he does not get support from anyone except Dr. Menon and Amita, his colleagues. Even his wife gets afraid of the increasing intense of the protest day by day and asked Shivamurthy to handle the issue patiently and avoid tension with any of the fundamental groups. The only person who stands with him during the crisis is Meena. She maintains the complete track of events that happens and guides Shivamurthy properly. Another thing that keeps Shivamurthy alive with his stand is his father's advice. His father has once said

If you settle for safety, if you choose to go along with whatever makes your life comfortable, truth will escape you completely. Shiva : there is a kind of person who lives like this. He is called an opportunist. Repeat the word after me so you remember it. Op-por-tun-ist., (Hariharan.82)

As a true historian, Shivamurthy always wants to write the history objectively and he gets dejected by the response for his faithful record on the life of Basavana. As a serious and faithful academician, he feels that fundamental groups are inhibiting the academia to function independently and such kind of interruption from the fanatic groups will leave the academia handicapped. He observes that "Is it possible to write history- or anything else at all- if you have to worry about your master's objections, their venal sentiment?" (Hariharan, 157).

### **Untiring spirit of Shivamurthy**

The turbulence increases day by day and Shivamurthy has been getting pressure from all the corners of academia to ask apology to the itihās group. With the moral support of the Meena, Shivamurthy faces the storm unmoved. Meena, with the help of her friend Amar, has managed to bring supporters for Shivamurthy and planned to conduct the rally to give voice for his cause, in turn, for the independence of academia from any external forces. The rally finally ends up in the chaos and the Vice Chancellor of the university has sent order to remove the lesson from the book and send it to the review committee for scrutiny. On the following day, Shivamurthy's room is also attacked by the fundamentalist and many of his history books are burned and looted from his room. Even after these many incidents and warning given by the Vice Chancellor of the university, Shivamurthy is very convincing with his stand that the true history must be written

and it should not be sacrificed for any influence. Shivamurthy's approach to all the threat is commented as follows.

Shiv is not violent in his approach. Shiv like Gandhiji is all for ahimsa and he has tried to protest against the unfair allegations of the protestors in a peaceful manner(Gupta, 102)

Finally Meena gets cured of her broken leg and decides to go back to hostel. She could see a transformed Shivamurthy from an agitated, confused person to a highly composed individual. Shivamurthy gives her his father's walking stick, to support her during walking. He has been preserving it for years, because whenever he feels left alone or weak he takes his father's stick to get revitalized. But now he feels like a revived individual, who has been made ready to face any turbulence in the future without any external support. Presently he is so confident that he has grown internally and he could face any challenge alone.

### **Conclusion**

In Times of Siege represents a new direction in Hariharan's career as a writer wading as it does into the choppy waters of contemporary Indian politics.

(Mitra, 134)

In Times of Siege traces the development of the individual from an ordinary person to a strong individual. Githa Hariharan has exhibited her skill from choosing the protagonist to the minute detail like walking stick, which stands as a symbol of strength. It is her brilliance to choose academia as a platform to showcase the ill effects of the interference of fundamental groups. Through this novel she advocates for the autonomy for academia from any of the external sources. For her Academia should be left free so that the objective education can be imparted to all, which will lead to the development of the healthiest society. She highlights her concept through Shivamurthy, when he says, Why not take Basava's suggestion, throw away the mind and the heart rusting from disuse? (Hariharan, 150)

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