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## Narrativising the Nation: On Myth, History, and Historiography in *In Times of Siege*

**Hariom Singh**

Research Scholar

Deptt of English

Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

This paper proposes to analyse Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* (2003) which was written against the backdrop of NCERT text book controversy and foregrounds the fissures of historiography in India. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha and Benedict Anderson's theoretical assumptions about the historical relationship between the nation and the narrative, the paper problematizes the issue of ideological construction of history in the context of academic/historiographical disputes which reflect unresolved tensions between varying versions of historical events often contesting official archiving. In the light of postmodern assumptions of history-writing as envisaged in the theory of Hayden White, this paper intends to attempt a deconstructive reading of *In Times of Siege* which questions some fundamental conclusions of different schools of historians—Marxist/ Nationalist; secular/right-wing which claim to be scientific, objective and authentic narratives of the past—and simultaneously explores the possibility of framing an apolitical school/university curriculum of history. The paper also endeavours to discuss the issue of censorship and cultural control of historical imagination in postcolonial India.

Githa Hariharan's novel *In Times of Siege* is about how nation figures in many (un)official narratives prevalent in our times. It is exemplary of how nation in the process of its birth and evolution is attached to history. The novel traces the demise of anti-colonial nationalism and the new turns which the nation states have taken in the postcolonial era. A historical novel at the core, it is concerned with historiography, history, processes of history's appropriation and establishing monopoly over it defying the idea of history as museum. One day Prof Shiv informs Meena that he has written a course module on social reform movements in the medieval India which has a lesson on Basavanna. A controversy brews up when an organization called Itihas Suraksha Manch (ISM) objects to the portrayal of Basava in the module. Shiv's act to defend his stance creates a heated academic debate over the authentication and appropriation of history as he puts it tersely: "but why this sudden anxiety about a historical figure we have safely consigned to text books till now? and from such unlikely quarters. I can only think of one answer a fear of history" (*ITS* 97). The goal before him is to ensure that ". . . he is patriotic, Hindu, Indian" and at the same time he has to give the proof that "he can say and do the right things, transform himself into a twenty-first century echo of the dissenting Basava" (*ITS* 89).

The series of fictional events depicted in the novel, names of some historians mentioned in veiled form may make one readily conclude that the novel *In Times of Siege* is written against the backdrop of NCERT text book controversy which had send shock waves in the entire Indian society. This controversy happened in free India in two parts: First, during the regime of Janta Party government at the centre from 1977 to 79, an attempt was made to rewrite certain portions of the NCERT history books as these were deemed inappropriate by a group of historians. The alleged motto behind this kind of act was to saffronise history in the garb of making Indian

history nationalist in tone and flavor. In 2002 again, the BJP led NDA government at the centre attempted to rewrite the history books through a new National Curriculum Framework (NCF) saying that it wanted to purge the Indian history off the dynastic control and cultural distortions caused by the Communists. NCERT issued a directive to CBSE to remove certain sections which hurt the sentiments of religious communities. Under this plan some of the portions of NCERT history books were re-written and re-circulated among students. However, in 2004 parliamentary elections, the Congress led UPA came back to the centre and re-issued the so called pre-saffronised NCERT books with suitable modifications aimed at de-saffronising history.

As we read the novel it becomes evident that most of the times the arguments raised by Prof Shiv coincidentally come very close to what Marxist historians of Indian history have been trying to say since past few decades. This results into a kind of power imbalance in the narrative in favour of the communist historians. Defining the function of history and the historian, Shiv says that he has been charged with “distorting facts and introducing an ideological bias into a lesson in the university’s medieval Indian history course” (76). Though as a whole by evocating Basava at the end of the novel, it tries to counter the power balance by laying emphasis on cultivating free and independent thinking.

Therefore, to illustrate this power imbalance in the narrative, the arguments from the various stakeholders in the issue need to be examined carefully by sorting out the genuine allegations from the baseless generalizations. I shall discuss some of the key charges made by two widely different groups of historians regarding rewriting history in government sponsored school text books. One should note that there can be many participants/discussants in the issue but here I have discussed only key charges and that too labeled by professional historians. Marxist historians call right wing historians communal and charge them of encouraging communal and colonial bias in historiography as they try to portray our ancient past in all glowing terms. Communalism in India became a very strong cultural trait during India’s colonization by Britishers. Britishers tried to disunite Hindus and Muslims so that it might become easy for them to facilitate their administration in India. Government in free India tried to devise a way so as to root out this evil of communalism in the dissemination of knowledge. To achieve this end the official discourses of history were somewhat tempered with at numerous places. But in doing so people/writers were not careful enough and weeded out even some of those portions which can genuinely be used by any follower of any religion to take pride in his/her religion.

There are many issues in our history which are controversial and lack consensus among historians like whether Aryans invaded India or they were indigenous people of our country? Were they inhabitants and architects of Indus/Saraswati river valley civilization? Catalogue of our achievements in the fields of Science and Mathematics, Was beef eating practiced in Vedic civilization?, the ancientness of Vedas etc. Similar issues have been raised in the novel as well. They accuse the historians of right wing of stale scholarship and lack of global recognition. They are supposed to be suffering from fear of history and aim at making history sectarian, narrow, and militant. In fact these two groups are at times so prejudiced against each other that they turn blind eye even towards the genuine researches. Mridula and Aditya Mukherjee in their essay “The History Text Book Controversy: An Overview” wrote that “if the teaching of modern scientific advances hurts the religious sentiments of one or the other group should it be banned

altogether” (Delhi Historians’ Group 10). Romila Thapar, another key historian and ideologue of the group writes in her article “Propaganda as History won’t Sell” writes:

The confrontation is being projected as between leftist and rightist historians. The confrontation is not between leftist and rightist historians but between professional historians and politicians sympathetic to the Hindutva persuasion. . . . History is not an arbitrary narrative where myth can override facts. There is also today the viability of contending interpretations, but each has to be based on accepted historical methodologies. (Delhi Historians’ Group 14)

The charges labeled by the Marxist historians on the NDA coalition government were of two types (i) Technical issues arising out of non compliance of the prescribed procedure. (ii) Issues of academic importance related to historiography in India. First set of issues was answered in its entirety by a court case which followed the controversy. Second set of issues was only partly answered by the judgment in the case.

To call Marxist historians communal on the basis of the portions deleted from the school textbooks authored by them requires the analysis and validation of facts which only a professional historian can do. In this section I have tried to analyze the Prof Shiv’s conception of historiography and to critique some of the fundamental assumptions implicit in his idea of history. Basically Prof Shiv in the novel and Marxists’ general conception of historiography try to exclude myths and legends from the official versions of their history writing calling them as unscientific and fabricated. In framing the account of Basava, Prof Shiv remarks:

Wading thru the numerous contradictory accounts of basava’s life means parting several meeting rivers. Separating history and myth, pulling apart history and legend. Deciding which chunks of history will keep the myth, pulling apart history and legend. Deciding which chunks of history will keep the myth earthbound; which slivers of myth will cast light and insight on dull historical fragments. The two have to be torn apart, their limbs disentangled, to see who is who . . . .” (87).

Marxists have dominated the official history writing in India for almost two decades so much so that what they have written has become the uncontested official version of history. They regarded Indian society as one, where innumerable inequalities have existed owing to Hindu religion and colonial rule. These historians, inspired by the new poetics of historiography of Hobsbawm, E P Thompson etc., tried to remove the religious elements from the official historical discourses of nation. They seek to rewrite the history of India from the perspective of the marginalized and downtrodden.

D D Kosambi in his book *Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India* writes:

The religions themselves do not constitute history, but their rise and change of function is excellent historical material. . . . Most of the surviving ancient Indian documents are overwhelmingly religious and ritualistic. The writers were not concerned with history or with reality. Trying to extract history from them without some previous knowledge of the actual structure of Indian society at the time of writing gives either no results or the ludicrous conclusions that may be read in most ‘histories’ of India. (15)

Marxist historians wanted to find alternative ways of reading the history. Echoing Kosambi, Romila Thapar in her book *The Penguin History of Early India* remarks “the more serious concern with history was its recognition as a discipline with a method, including the search for readings that incorporated viable alternative ways of explaining the past” (xviii). She goes on to count the difficulties which historians face in establishing the facticity of myths so as to make them feasible historical evidence, “But because of their fluid chronology, and the fact that they are generally not records of actual happenings, myths can only be used in a limited way. Mythology and history are often counter posed and myth cannot be treated as a factual account” (xxii). In weeding out myths from the discourses of history, they undermined the importance of religion in the process of nation building or at times consciously/unconsciously transgressed the process of nation building and presented history as the jumbled collection of facts and evidences. This approach to root out myths from the past completely is a methodological fallacy in the process of history writing and shows their ignorance that difference between the history and the myth is blurring gradually.

In the novel, Prof Shiv’s approach to construct a factual account of Basava’s life appears more to have been inspired from Marxist historiographers’ method to write history. He reveals that his objective is, “to write a lesson that weeds out stereotypes, makes realistic assessments. To take this fragment from the medieval past and reconstruct an entire range of possibilities” (*ITS* 40). This approach to demystify myths and to squeeze out the factual history from them is a problematic task and politically undermines the importance of myths in our culture.

A postmodernist approach to historiography has reassessed the importance of myths in historiography and adopts a ‘constructionist’ view of history. Philosophers like Roland Barthes have viewed the study of myths as a way of explaining our present with the help of the past. This practice was given prominence in many of the postcolonial writings where it was not possible to restore completely the damaged/lost cultural past of a nation in its original form. Barthes in his book *Mythologies* (1957) acknowledging the immense potential of myths writes that “myth is a language” (10). Highlighting the similarity between history and myth, Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) opines that in our postmodernist era history itself has become a modern myth. He classifies knowledge as of two types Scientific and Narrative with myths, stories etc belonging to the latter. He acknowledges that traditional knowledge has the “preeminence of narrative form” (19) and that scientific knowledge does not “represent the totality of knowledge” (7). It has always “existed in addition to and in competition and conflict” with narrative (7). The process of legitimation or validation of these two types of knowledges is different and cannot be compared. Thus the way through which scientific knowledge, which is discursive in nature, establishes itself in society cannot be the ground to disregard myths or narratives in general as unscientific.

Ironically enough science in 19<sup>th</sup> century used rules or ‘language games’ of narrative knowledge to legitimize or validate itself. In explaining the process of legitimation Lyotard precisely points out that there are no facts, only interpretations. These interpretations function as facts within communities of consensus and are never value neutral. On one hand where narrative knowledge does not give primacy to the questions of its own legitimation, it considers, on the other, scientific knowledge as simply a variant upon itself. But the vice versa is not true. Scientific knowledge considers the former as belonging to “a different mentality: savage,



primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, . . . .” (27). Lyotard explains that scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, thus highlighting the mutual interdependence of the two. This argument of Lyotard changed the whole conception of historiography in postmodernism and inaugurated what critics like Hayden White designate as ‘literary turn’ in historiography. Assessing the implications of Lyotard’s arguments on historical narratives, White in his book *Metahistory* (1973) comments on the nature of problems related to historiography,

Historiographical disputes on the level of ‘interpretation’ are in reality disputes over the ‘true’ nature of the historian's enterprise. History remains in the state of conceptual anarchy in which the natural sciences existed during the sixteenth century, when there were as many different conceptions of ‘the scientific enterprise’ as there were metaphysical positions . . . . So, too, disputes over what ‘history’ ought to reflect similarly varied conceptions of what a proper historical explanation ought to consist of and different conceptions, therefore, of the historian's task. (13)

He argues that the principles or poetics of writing literature and history are essentially same thus leaving little or no difference between history writing and storytelling. The conception of history as something to be ‘found out’ or ‘discovered’ by a historian “obscures the extent to which ‘invention’ also plays a part in the historian’s operations” (7). He identifies romance, tragedy, comedy and satire as four basic tropes borrowed from literature which determine the emplotment of historical narrative. Also, four major tropes metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony which poetry uses decide the use of language by historians. Thus, a historian uses ‘narrative tactics’ in the construction of history. Unlike Marxist historians, he problematizes the boundaries between myth and history by showing that history too, like its neglected counterpart myth, belongs to what Lyotard calls ‘narrative knowledges’. He even dwells on the question ideological contamination of historical narrative and says that in every narrative of our past there is an irreducible ideological component and identifies four basic ideological positions viz. Anarchism, Conservatism, Radicalism, and Liberalism which a historian can adopt in framing his/her narrative. So on one hand if it is necessary to teach history in a way which strengthens the ties of our country, on the other we should reassess the vast potential which our myths can have in the process of nation building. We must re-interpret our mythical past in a way so as to make the secular fabric of our nation strong. Various ideologies should be in continuous dialogue with each other over the issues on which opinion stands divided so as to establish some kind of consensus by way of giving conclusions though provisional they may be. This process will ultimately purge the process of curriculum framing and text book writing off any insidious motives.

The evocation of Basava at the end not only reinforces the secular fabric of our nation but also provides a common ground for the historians to argue with and understand each other. No writing is ideologically ‘innocent’ and gaps and fissures can be located in any writing motivated by any ideology. To blame one side for all the distortions in the representation of history and to entirely justify one side would be like portraying the entire picture in black and white whereas the truth lies somewhere between the two extremes. Whatever the truth may be, it must conform to the ideals and idea of modern secular nation as envisioned in our constitution and should be based on scientific and rational thinking. Any attempt at portraying a sectarian, one sided,

monolithic history of a country like India is fraught with danger and the country may run the risk of losing its key cultural characteristic i.e. its heterogeneity or unity in diversity. Thus, a Marxist claim of developing a secular historiography and its relation to modernity is a contentious one and is critiqued on several grounds. A historian irrespective of his/her ideological orientation needs to have proper understanding of secular ideals and should have firm belief in the ideals enshrined in Indian constitution.

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