Chapter IV

IN TIMES OF SIEGE

The change that occurred in the last decade of the twentieth century was not an event but a process. Arguably, though, it was an event – the destruction of the mosque – that was emblematic of the process. The real change involved something intangible, if as pervasive as smog. It was a change in the dominant ethos of the country, in the attitudes of mind that define what it means to be Indian.

Shashi Tharoor. 1997. *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*

This chapter on Githa Hariharan’s *In Times of Siege* examines the post-Babri Masjid demolition scenario of intolerance fostered by the fundamentalists’ victory in razing down the mosque in an attempt to undo historical wrongs; it shows how things changed and there could never be the same mood of rational tolerance once the final blow to the disputed mosque was struck. The novel takes as its central concern the controversy over a chapter on medieval history claimed by an organization to be a distortion of history, presenting the past in an unfavourable light, carrying forward the trend set by the controversy over the history of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid site. The chapter looks into the circumstances of a historian caught in the web of history, when the dominant and the powerful join hands with fanatic fundamentalists to challenge a certain version of history. The novel shows how everything takes a communal hue and the controversy that starts over the portrayal of a poet-reformer is blown out of proportion to become a communal issue by twisting and turning. Not only history but also the process of writing history and the historian’s intention come under scrutiny by self-appointed protectors of history when the past depicted by the historian does not hold good to its implications in the present. The chapter attempts to bring to light the writer’s view that there are many ways of looking at history and no one way can be singled out as authentic or true. It also examines the writer’s comparison of the times of Basava, the times of the
Vijayanagar Empire, the post-Independence India and the year 2000 in the novel, that is, a few years after the Babri Masjid demolition.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 has left an indelible mark on India, changing the country’s history and future forever. The victory of fundamentalist forces in the demolition of the disputed structure has given a boost to their organization ever since. The saga of communal fundamentalism has carried on uninterrupted, seeping into all aspects of life in India. In Times of Siege depicts one such instance of fundamentalist intolerance which causes a ruckus, this time over history. The novel takes the year 2000 of contemporary history as the time-frame; the Babri Masjid is already torn apart, its rubble lingering on in the atmosphere, hampering vision and allowing only short-sightedness to fanatic fundamentalists.

Shivamurthy, a professor of history at a New Delhi based Open University called KGU, is caught unawares when a chapter on the twelfth-century poet-reformer Basava, written by him, creates a furor. An organization called “Itihas Suraksha Manch” takes offence to his portrayal of the medieval poet claiming it to be biased and distorted. A whole dispute on the authenticity of historical facts takes off while the face of fundamentalist forces in the country is uncovered.

Shiv leads the placid life of an academician with his wife Rekha, who is visiting their daughter Tara in the US; throughout the novel, Rekha is conspicuous by her absence from the scene of action, speaking on the phone from Seattle on a few occasions. When the novel opens on 31 August 2000, Shiv is at Kamala Nehru University to take home Meena, a ward and daughter of an old friend, whose presence in the city he was but vaguely aware of, who has broken a leg. The book begins calmly enough but the calm proves to be misleading, just like the silence before a storm. The reader is prepared to expect solemnity ahead, starting off on a sluggish note. This is to intensify the ferocity of the storm that follows soon. After he moves Meena in, Shiv is ill at ease and “feels like an intruder in his own house” (Siege 9). A lot of effort is demanded of Shiv to share a platonic space with Meena, who attracts him with her free-spirit and “certainly seems to know her mind” (Siege 22). The intrusion of this young, politically conscious woman, with her entourage of friends and comrades, comes as an upheaval in the otherwise uneventful life of a meek and diffident Shiv.
While he is still coming to terms with this invasion, another event splits his life into a before and an after. A phone call from a non-descript newspaper called “Current” robs him of his senses: the reporter wants information about Shiv’s “controversial article”, which is based “on the twelfth-century poet and social reformer Basavanna” (Siege 51). Later, the head of his department at the university, Dr Sharma informs him that his chapter has “fallen into the wrong hands.” He goes on to blame Shiv for a crime, he is hardly aware of: “It’s a pity you didn’t guard against ambiguity, Shiv. Apparently there is a certain lack of clarity in the lesson—anyway, the lesson has hurt the sentiments of a Hindu watchdog group” (Siege 53). He tells a shocked Shiv that the Itihas Suraksha Manch accuses him of “distorting history and historical figures” and elaborates:

> 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 Brahmins and temple priests. And also you have not made it clear enough that Basavanna was much more than an ordinary human being. There are people who consider him divine… (Siege 53-54)

The head’s call makes the picture clearer and Shiv can “discern a mad logic in the instant web being woven around him” (Siege 54). The storm of fundamentalism and intolerance has begun. He feels trapped and bewildered at the sudden and inexplicable turn of events on both, the personal and the political front. The two unconnected events coalesce into one and hit Shiv with full impact taking his life into an unfamiliar political arena from where he has to fight for his beliefs.

Though Shiv is taken aback by this abrupt happening, Hariharan prepares the reader in advance for such a scenario of clashing ideologies. The writer imperceptibly brings into focus many clues about the growing intolerance in society. The department where Shiv works is the hub of mutual disagreement; the so-called intelligentsia, the professors in the university, is bigoted and biased. In the very first meeting that Shiv attends in the department many issues come to the fore paving the way for those to follow. Somewhat like Shakespeare’s opening scenes, the major characters and issues are introduced. Dr Sharma, the head of the department, is a meek man whose motto in life is to avoid controversies. He appears to be a puppet in the hands of Arya, who assumes an important “fundoo” role in the novel. Shiv expresses doubts about Arya’s doctorate and his competence as a historian, and makes a disguised reference to his connections with
“khaki” clad people (Siege 17). Then there is a debate on a chapter in which Menon, another colleague of Shiv’s has edited some “questionable statements on minority communities” which has displeased Arya (Siege 18). Disagreements, both expressed and covert, are the mood of the moment and Arya who “each time he says the words ‘foreigner’ or ‘Muslim’ he spits them out like something sour in his mouth,” stands out as the trouble-maker (Siege 19). It is noteworthy here that all these arguments are among historians who play a pivotal role in the novel.

Hariharan portrays Arya as a strong character who keeps popping into Shiv’s thoughts time and again even before the crises hits Shiv. The reader first hears of Arya in action at the aforementioned meeting when the head talks of Arya pointing out that some faculty members are crossing their limits by “overusing their editorial pencils.” This beginning is a hint for the problems of a similar nature that Arya creates for Shiv. The issue of the historians’ limits comes up—how far can a historian exercise his discretion without being partial? What makes it tricky is the fact that this topic is introduced by Arya whose academic credentials are vague: “It’s only recently that Arya has been promoted to being addressed as Doctor. Shiv still doesn’t know where the man got a doctorate from, or even if he has one in the first place” (Siege 17).

Besides, his personal and social leanings are also doubtful. The writer discloses a change in Arya’s persona from being a “mousy dogsbody” to having “a more aggressive face” over a few years. As for his “connections”, there are “rumours of the weekly meetings in Arya’s house on campus” and the guests sporting “khaki gear” (Siege 17). Hariharan tactfully stays away from making an obvious mention of the RSS, and is successful in making her point: meetings and khaki-knickers are the hallmarks of the organization. This description clearly shows that Arya is affiliated with fundamentalist groups. At one point Shiv compares Arya to Nazis, “He’s like all his ancestors—tyrants capable of personal acts of kindness. Nazis who responded to music and poetry” (Siege 30). In fact, the fundamentalist powers in India have been charged of showing fascist tendencies. So, indirectly, Hariharan uses the character of Arya as a representative of the sectarian organizations in the country.

It is because of his indistinct scholarship and his fundamentalist inclination that Shiv is wary of giving him any importance “as academic”; he finds it difficult to take him “as the enemy-in-training” or “the historian” (Siege 17). The thought of trying to put
Arya in the slot of a future enemy, says something about the impending enmity with Shiv. He is an incompetent academician too. The writer tells that Arya was a pamphleteer before turning into a “scholar” lately (Siege 18). Shiv compares him to a toy tiger which looks, “hungry, single-minded. A little like Arya’s new look” (Siege 29). This also shows him to be an unfriendly person with a purpose which isolates him from the others in the department. This may be the result of his new ‘connections’.

The issue of the dispute and the discussion over it in the meeting also throws light on the communal proclivity of Arya, who raises a finger at Menon for cutting from a chapter, what he calls “a key paragraph”, which he goes on to read:

> Our land has always been a temptation to greedy marauders, barbarous invaders and oppressive rulers. This story of invasion and resistance is three thousand years old. Lakhs of foreigners found their way to India during these thousands of years, but they all suffered humiliating defeat. Some of them we digested. When we were disunited, we failed to recognize who were our own and who were foreigners, and we were unable to digest them. Today, apart from Muslims, even Christians, Parsis and other foreigners are also recognized as minority communities. But in many states the Hindus have been reduced to a minority, and the Muslims, Christians or Sikhs are in a majority. (Siege 19)

This paragraph is left out by Menon who wants to “steer clear of controversial statements” (Siege 18). But it appears that controversy is what Arya is looking for. The contents of the paragraph display bias, religious fanaticism, and lack of objectivity. That Arya finds it important is evidence of his mischievous intention. He is encouraged in his attempt by the timid head of the department who only suggests “a healthy dialogue” between Arya and Menon, to find a solution (Siege 20). All other faculty members including Shiv prefer not to interfere. But Shiv cannot afford to stay quiet for long, because it is in this ‘Arya-tainted atmosphere’ that a bigger controversy takes him off his feet. The reader finds significance in Meena’s poster which suggests “Speak up! Before it’s too late”, linking Shiv to Menon (Siege 27).

So, while Shiv is still trying to comprehend the problem and its cause, Meena guesses it right: “It’s Arya, isn’t it?” (Siege 55). Shiv is flustered at a sudden assault on his credibility as a historian:
... they are objecting to the fact that I have not made the heroes heroic enough, and that I have made the villains too villainous. At any rate, they claim the lesson *distorts* history... It seems I have not sung enough of a paean to the glory of Hindu kingdoms; and that I make too much of caste divisions among Hindus. *(Siege 55)*

Shiv realizes that the problem is not limited to his portrayal of Basava; it is actually about his not bothering to stick to the glorification of Hinduism while writing about the life and times of Basava. His observation comes true when the dispute extends to include Hindu-Muslim relations, reverberating echoes of the Ayodhya controversy and the Babri Masjid demolition—a result of religious fundamentalism.

Shiv finds the name of the “crazy group” behind the controversy very strange: “the Itihas Suraksha Manch. The protection of history! Whoever heard of history having to be protected?” And Meena retorts with scorn that the word “protection” is used these days to imply “attack”. Shiv finds himself agreeing with Meena: “… it is true that whether people are talking about culture or history or women’s rights, protection has become a much-abused word. A cover-up for all kinds of bullying tactics” *(Siege 55)*. Shiv’s reflection reveals that he senses a general condition of anarchy in all aspects of life.

Shiv feels lost and petrified at the thought of facing up to the problem which is too obvious to ignore: “He feels his eloquence about the complexities of history drying up at the thought of confronting fists, threats, physical danger…” *(Siege 55)*. Not being able to comprehend reality as yet, Shiv feels torn between the suggestions of the fearful Dr Sharma and the bold and assertive Meena. The head is in panic and advises acting quickly “to stop this from growing into a controversy” for which he thinks “a full apology or retraction” from Shiv is the best option, and in the near future the lesson may be taken back from circulation *(Siege 54)*. On the other hand, Meena readies him to take the problem head-on: “... obviously you can’t apologize or take back a word of the lesson”, and jumps right into action, planning: “How do we beat our fundoos at their game?” *(Siege 57)*. Hariharan draws the contrast between the middle-aged professor and the young and dynamic Meena, quite clearly. Her calling the “fundoos” as their common rival shows that while Shiv is wary of even believing the problem to be real, Meena
willingly joins hands with Shiv in playing the ‘game’ of ideologies. The writer offers an insight into the tormented mind of Shiv who is surprised by Meena’s promptness:

Fundoos. How familiar Meena’s generation is with the word fundamentalist. So much a fact of life that a nickname, fundoo, rolls off Meena’s tongue with ease. A nickname for a pet, a pet enemy. The familiar garden-variety hatemonger, inescapable because he has taken root in your own backyard. Fundoo, fundamentalist. Fascist. Obscurantist. Terrorist. And the made-in-India brand, the communalist—a deceptively innocuous-sounding name for professional other-community haters. (Siege 57)

Hariharan shows that fundamentalism is widespread in India and its manifestation in the form of communalism is the most common in the present times. By depicting Meena to be better equipped than Shiv in dealing with this disguised face of communalism, the writer suggests that it has raised its ugly head in the contemporary society spreading its roots covertly over the recent years.

Shiv is unable to decide his future course of action to respond to the calamity that has struck him abruptly. When he gets some time away from the imposing presence of the head and Meena, he thinks of “the offending lesson” and realizes without straining his memory, “It is, ironically, one of the few lessons he has written in his teaching career that was informed by genuine interest and historical curiosity” (Siege 59). He recounts in detail, the life and times of Basava:

Basava was plagued by questions; he needed to examine and think and criticize everything that was traditional, sanctioned, as much as he needed to breathe. Basava gathered around him a unique congregation of mystics and social revolutionaries. Together they attempted a creative, courageous experiment: a community sought to exclude no one—not women, not the lowest, most ‘polluting’ castes. Poets, potters, reformers, washermen, philosophers, prostitutes, learned brahmans, housewives, tanners, ferrymen—all were part of the brief burst of Kalyana’s glory. All were equal in that they were veerashaivas; warriors of Siva. (Siege 60)

Shiv thinks of Basava as a revolutionary, a man of ideas who had the ability to challenge the norms of the society ridden with the ills of caste system and gender-discrimination. He recollects that Basava and his warriors wrote poetry called “vachana”, which
“searched passionately for the many faces of truth” and aimed at reaching out to the masses (Siege 60). This shows that Basava believed in truth as multifaceted, not unique. To Shiv, Basava’s charisma lies in the fact that he was a man of the people, with an “egalitarian dream”: “The dream spread and took hold of people who had not been people before in Kalyana, people who had just been their functions….a wave that threatened to swallow social conventions and religious ritual, staple diet of tradition” (Siege 61). But, soon his movement for social change was met with insurmountable resistance even from the king, when a marriage was planned between “a cobbler and a brahmin”, causing widespread violence. Unable to control the bloodshed and arson, Basava left the city and later “died under mysterious circumstances” (Siege 62). But, to the writer’s mind, Basava has left a legacy and his “passionate questions” are still relevant (Siege 63).

Hariharan portrays Shiv as a staunch believer in Basava and his dream, which he finds pertinent in his times as well, especially now, caught in the same web: “His movement for equality, for democracy, must be remembered, but so must its destruction; one without the other perverts memory. How is Shiv to explain Basava—his ideas, his times—to some bunch of hate-crazy goons?” (Siege 63). The same kind of people who were afraid of losing their elite status in Basava’s times, are now scared of losing their dominant Hindu majority status, if equality and democracy prevail. He realizes that the fundamentalists have the power to damage, which is enhanced by their bigotry.

Shiv finds himself on the horns of a dilemma: should he stick to what he has written and refuse to apologize or else fearing the end that Basava met, give in to pressure from the bigots. While on the one hand, he is tempted to “…hit out, dazzle the head and the dean into submission with Basava’s courage and passion” (Siege 63), on the other he “strikes back in fear”; but after some deliberation, he makes his mind:

He is an academic, he argues, not some rabble-rousing 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 a professor if you can’t stand up to someone telling you what to think? How to think? Shiv hears the apparently gentle tone, determined to be patient and reasonable, as persuasive as his own father used to be: Shiv, do you imagine an ordinary man cannot be a hero? (Siege 64)
After invoking Basava, Shiv knows what to do—he decides that he will fight his war. He feels charged up to put up a brave front: “A soldier putting on his armour to face the world with its deans and heads, and its wild and weedy protectors of history. Its Meenas, waiting for Shiv to turn into the club-wielding, foolhardy imitation of a mythical hero” (Siege 65). Shiv is to face two-sided opposition—from the university administration and from the Itihas Suraksha Manch backed by fundamentalists, while coming up to Meena’s expectations of fighting like a hero.

It is at the department meeting with the head and the dean that Shiv gets to know the reasons for the controversy. The head informs him that it is not the text but its implications which are problematic, and goes on to read out a long list of “what he likes to call ambiguous statements, as if the word ambiguous contains magic that automatically turns fact to falsehood” (Siege 69). Shiv is exasperated at this intrusion into his territory as a historian. He attempts to clarify: “But all this is part of history, drawn from a variety of sources,” and adds, “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” (Siege 68). Shiv brings out the problem of validity of historical and hagiographical sources. This applies to the Ayodhya dispute as well, where history mingles with myths and legends. Fundamentalist forces want to use history to their advantage. Basically, to fundamentalists it is not the historicity of facts that matters, but their suitability to their sectarian aims in the present. So, they denounce “any image of the past that does not conform to current theology” (Siege 156). Fundamentalist forces want to mould history to match their purpose of either glorification or detestation of a community, to nurture narrow communal identities. This practice is widespread in contemporary India, with its heterogeneous demography. It is such an atmosphere of divisive politics that Hariharan depicts in the novel, where self-owned protectors of history, like the Itihas Suraksha Manch, flourish. The impudence of the Manch in the novel is exhibited in their 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. (Siege 69)
These demands of the Manch deprive the historian of any authority over his work. The last one, especially, shows the Manch’s desire to gain supremacy over the historian, though there is no proof of its own credibility. Even the dean finds the third demand contemptible and the head agrees with him. But Shiv finds the head unreliable; he is due to retire and would want to avoid controversy if he wants an extension. Through such a description, Hariharan unveils the murky side of the academia putting at stake their scholarship for meager gains like promotions or extensions. But not everybody can be put in this category. Shiv puts his foot down and refuses to bend under pressure; his refusal shocks the dean and the head. He makes his stand clear: “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 historian” (Siege 70). From here begins the battle of ideologies: on one side is Shiv—inspired by his father and Basava, and backed by Meena and her comrades; and on the other is the Itihas Suraksha Manch with its army of fundamentalists, and the university authorities which have succumbed to pressure into doing as directed by the Manch. The rest of the novel depicts how Shiv copes up with this controversy and the events following it.

The post-demolition times in which Shiv lives offer a scenario in which the socio-political equations in the country have changed considerably. People have become more sensitive to issues of communalism and respond mindlessly to the call of fanatics who have come in the forefront of Indian politics because of the boost they received after they succeeded in razing down the Babri Masjid. Their selfish-interest in the vote-bank politics once served, now they look for newer territories of conflict and controversy, even if remotely related with their religion or community. And this group of hate-mongers does not hesitate in using violent means, and making a mountain out of a molehill to catch the public eye. The objection thrown in Shiv’s face is not a new phenomenon; controversies are rather, the flavour of the times:

It’s just some lunatic fringe flexing their muscle in the wrong arena. Why is everyone taking it so seriously, acting as if battle is imminent? Are they not empowering the loonies by paying attention to them? After all, Shiv and his friends have laughed at so many imaginative samples of chauvinism in the recent past. The United States was originally a nation of Hindus. Jesus preached his sermon on the mount in Kashmir. St. Paul’s cathedral was actually a temple built by Sant Pal. Not so long ago, Amita
would ask Arya with a wicked grin, ‘Why do you have a calculator, Dr Arya? I thought you could do it all in your head with Vedic math.’ (Siege 74-75)

Hariharan takes images, all too familiar, from the recent times and pastes them on this collage of controversy, intolerance, bigotry—the colours of saffron and red splattered to make a mosaic. The writer makes a reference to some other issues that have been in news lately. Meena and her friend Amar come up with a long list:

‘Campaigns against Christians, the murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two children…’

‘The attacks on M.F. Husain for painting Hindu goddesses in the nude’…

‘Teachers in Goa having their faces blackened for setting “politically incorrect” exams and the recall of a volume on the freedom struggle’…‘The disruption of the shooting of a film on the plight of Hindu widows in Benaras.’ (Siege 100)

Later in the novel, Arya makes a mention of some other controversies, and tries to justify the cause taken up by his kind:

‘If it comes to defending books by … who is it … Taslima Rushdie,’ he says. ‘If it is someone like that or someone who wants to make a hundred percent blue film about widows in Benares, the secular fundamentalists are all on the streets shouting, “No ban, no censorship.” But our historians and thinkers and activists get different treatment. They won’t let us speak.’

(Siege 127)

While some episodes have been addressed directly, others find a disguised mention. A brief discussion of these issues one by one is important here to understand how they are linked to the controversy facing Shiv.

Graham Stuart Staines, an Australian missionary was accused by Hindus of the Sangh Parivar of being a zealous evangelical. He was burnt to death along with his two minor sons while in sleep in Keonjhar district in Orissa in January 1999. Staines had been working in Orissa among the tribal poor and especially with leprosy patients since 1965. While there is a perception that he converted many tribals to Christianity, the rise in Christian population in the district as claimed by the Hindu fundamentalists is very slight. In 2003, the Bajrang Dal activist Dara Singh was convicted of leading the mob that
perpetrated the crime. This incident is a proof of the fanatics’ growing targets of hatred and religious intolerance.

Censorship owing to prejudice is a common phenomenon in the field of arts and literature. Famous painter M. F. Hussain was taken to task by fundamentalist groups for painting Hindu goddesses in the nude. He was charged of blasphemy, claiming that it was a deliberate attempt to denigrate Hindu gods and goddesses and presenting them in a way that robs them of their divinity, thus attacking the religious sentiments of Hindus. There was widespread debate over this: while some hurled abuses at Hussain, others in the academic and art circles supported him vouching for the liberty of expression. Hussain has many court cases pending against him.

A third such controversy relates to Deepa Mehta’s film Water, set in the Benaras of 1938, which portrays the life of Hindu widows, isolated from the world, living in an ashram. The film was nominated for Oscars but was received with a major outburst of detestation from the Hindu brigade in India. The fundamentalists were offended by the presentation and objected to the screening of the film. In fact, Arya in the novel calls it ‘blue film’; similar allegations were hurled by the real-life ‘fundoos’.

It is again of common knowledge that Salman Rushdie had a fatwa issued against him for his work The Satanic Verses. The case of Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin, looking for a place to hide from fundamentalists, does not require straining of the memory. These writers are criticized by the fundamentalists for presenting their religion in a bad light. Here again, there have been discussions and scholarly debates over the freedom of expression in literature. But it is not just the arena of imaginative scholarship which is under siege; history too has faced the ire of self-owned critics and scholars. There is a reference to the controversy over the history of the freedom struggle, which is discussed later, in the chapter.

All these episodes have taken place after the Babri-Masjid demolition. The demolition of the disputed mosque in 1992 is hailed as a great victory for the Hindutva forces in India. In their bid to make place for the proposed Ram temple, the Hindu bigots, flounced all rules of law, of religious sanctity and social decency, and reduced the mosque to rubble. The legal proceedings in the case are still on, but without much outcome. The Liberhan Commission probing the matter for sixteen years now, has not
been able to submit its report yet. This is because the accused in the case are politicians of high-standing. Many questions about the demolition are still unanswered. What has been a great boost to the flourishing of the fundamentalist forces post-demolition is the fact that the perpetrators have come out scot-free. There is no stopping the tide of hate and intolerance ever since. The change of ruling party at the centre, although for a relatively small period after the demolition, paved the way for uninterrupted march of narrow-minded and hateful mob behaviour. It is such ‘times of siege’ that Hariharan depicts in her text.

Shiv realizes to his dismay that it is not only his portrayal of Basava which is unacceptable to the sectarian hate-mongers; Menon reminds him of “a similar controversy in 1994” about a Kannada play on Basava, published in 1986:

It won a state award and was prescribed as a textbook in a couple of universities. Then eight years later, some group in Karnataka—cousins, or ancestors, of Shiv’s Manch—woke up to the possibilities of the book. They accused the play of portraying Basava as a coward; implying that he committed suicide; casting aspersions on the ‘chastity’ of some women saints; and letting some characters use obscene language. (Siege 109-10)

Later, in 1995, the book was removed from the university syllabus, “in view of a law and order situation”. This makes Shiv wonder:

Now, in 2000, the distance between the imaginary lands of literature and the prosaic city of history has shrunk. All occupy the same beleaguered space, the same territory under indefinite siege. The horizon, the sky, all wide-open spaces are reduced to the size of a pinpoint; the Manch and its cohorts are telling them all that there is only one way to remember the past. (110)

This is how the writer shows Shiv to be a small part of a larger scheme of existence, where those who dare to differ, who refuse to accept the given and give shape to a contesting version based on their perspective of the world around them are ‘besieged’. It appears that the forces of religious fanaticism are keeping a watch to make sure everything falls in their line, and the moment there is a diversion, the offender is victimized.
Shiv is one such ‘offender’, who is inspired by his father as much as by Basava to follow the path suggested by them in word and in action. He is constantly haunted by the memories of his father:

Freedom. Values. The common good. ‘You must mine the truth,’ his father would say. ‘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. (Siege 82)

With such words of wisdom held close to his heart, and sure of his righteousness, he jumps into the fire ignited by the fundamentalists’ fury. He does not want to be called an ‘opportunist’ and so chooses struggle over giving in to unjustified demands of unruly people.

In his refusal to apologize, Shiv brings up many contestable issues: Who is a historian? What is history? Is there one history of an event? If not, then which is true? Hariharan takes up these questions in her text, provides insight through the condition that Shiv is facing, and then leaves it to the reader to find his answers. In the recent times, many a controversy on history has raised its head. The writer owns it in one of her interviews that, while she was working on the novel, a hullabaloo was going on about history: “I was midway through my novel, when to my shock I found that eminent historians Sarkar and Panicker (sic) had their volume on the freedom struggle recalled….it was almost as if the media coverage and the kind of historians’ fear was both similar yet different from my fictional situation” (The Deccan Herald, April 2003).

In the year 2000, the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) called back two volumes of its “Towards Freedom” project from the Oxford University Press citing the reason that the editors K. N. Panikker and Sumit Sarkar had given it for publication without review from the Council. The committee set up to look into the matter exonerated the historians, and it turned out that the problem was not procedural but ideological. Instead, the then chairperson of the ICHR, B. R. Grover was pointed out by the committee in its report as playing “a dubious role” (Frontline Jan-Feb 2005). There was great uproar from the academia against this controversy which secular historians saw as “another effort at saffronising history” (The Hindu, 15 April 2003). The reason behind this correlation was Grover’s well-known association with the RSS, which gained further
importance from the fact that the action of withholding the publication was taken during the BJP’s rule at the center.

Hariharan takes up the writing and rewriting of history as issues of discussion in the novel. Through Shiv, the professor of history, she puts up her opinion on the subject of history. In an interview, she says:

History, with all its ugliness and achievements, is something that we should have access to explore, debate. This is what I wanted to focus on, because I think history is not just something that we study in school. It is a tool of analysis for us to know our past. (The Deccan Herald, April 2003)

In the novel, Shiv recalls his father telling him: “You must know the past with all its riches and terrors, draw on the lessons of both in equal measure” (Siege 82). Shiv follows his father’s advice in writing the history of Basava and his times, but falls in the trap of contemporary politics. But even before the controversy comes up, Shiv is not ready to accept the unilateral view of history. He is working on a chapter on the Hampi ruins, the ruins of the glorious Vijayanagar Empire, another topic close to his heart. While writing the chapter, he feels an impulse to rewrite the history of the Empire, giving multifarious views:

Surely the past is more than a mere fossil? Or a perfect cast whose mould has been broken? Shiv feels a sudden rush of ambition: he would like 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. (Siege 40)

In this novel, we see Hariharan apparently supporting the notion of a many-faced history, different for each onlooker. But the incidents in the novel appear to be warning the protagonist against an attempt to look at the past from a different angle than suits those in power. The power lies with the majority, who rule the roost, basking in the glory of their faith and the rich past they pose to inherit. The Itihas Suraksha Manch is a group of such fundamentalists who wield power in the name of history. History is misused by designating it a monolith, and refusing tolerance of a contesting version.

It is actually a game of power-politics. The fundamentalist are desperate to catch the public eye and take control of matters. And in the politics of self-interest, even those who disagree with them or are indifferent, stand up and match their frequency with that of
the fundamentalists. In the novel, the head of Shiv’s department, who is generally timid and non-committal, suddenly reveals a vigorous side against Shiv. This change in his behavior may be attributed to various factors hinted at in the reading of the novel: one, to ensure professional benefits, and two, to keep peace with Arya who is known to have political ‘connections’ which he can use against those who don’t comply.

The head tells Shiv, “I didn’t know you hankered to be a hero, Dr Murthy. We are middle-aged professors, not stuntmen.” To him, taking a stand for righteousness is a stunt; he certainly is a weak-minded person. He goes on to preach that their job in the department is “to standardize knowledge” and adds, “This does not contradict our commitment to historical authenticity.” But he changes the tone soon, suggesting, “The readers are only BA students,” probably to mean that they can be taught anything in the name of history. While Shiv wants to present the past as it was, with its good and evil, the head wants him to practice selection and omission: “Our students need to know dates, the achievements of great saints and kings. Why get into debates and controversies—however fascinating, however historically permissible—if the students don’t need these or appreciate them? … we have to guard against irresponsible controversies” (Siege 70). This indifference towards his responsibilities as a teacher of history is accountable to the fear of facing any harsh consequences at the hands of the Itihas Suraksha Manch and the powers backing it. Shiv realizes that the head is concerned about “damage control”, but to his mind “the problem is not historical method” (Siege 71). He is proved right, later, when the dispute changes shape.

In the face of such reactions to the controversy, Meena compares the head to “liberal fence-sitters” and says, “One whiff of danger and they fall off the fence, over the wrong side” (Siege 79). In this statement, she takes a dig at people who have no principles, and are easily moulded under pressure. Meena is a daring person and so, disapproves of the head’s panic reaction. But she is a student herself, and probably does not realize the challenges one has to meet, especially in the seats of authority.

After the meeting, Shiv wonders what the real issue is: “How to write history? Or, as Meena and her friends would have it, how to fight the obscurantists?” (Siege 71). Shiv is a historian forced in to the political task of making a choice. The academic is trapped in the muddle created by fundamentalists who want to control the writing and interpretation
of history. The Arya-clan is shown to have the clout to control the university authorities as well. Shiv’s colleague, Menon breaks the news:

The booklet containing your module is being sent for review to some so-called expert committee, all very hush-hush, no one even knows the names of these experts. And the head seems to have decided that till this happens, students should be asked to return their copies of the material.’

... Apparently the head and the dean have been advised by higher-ups—not our university bigwigs but real ones—that your resignation may be the only way to satisfy the Manch. (Siege 85)

This clearly shows that even the university authorities have to obey “orders from above” and set up a committee to review the lesson (Siege 93). The centres of knowledge have to face mob censorship and are forced to toe the line of the ‘higher-ups’ who are probably the same as those supporting the Itihas Suraksha Manch in its campaign against Shiv. He is apprehensive about fulfilling their demands because it will encourage them to carry on this practice of bigotry in the future. Menon shares Shiv’s fears at the free reign enjoyed by the fundamentalist forces in the contemporary world: “It’s like waking up in a world full of Aryas” (Siege 85). To Shiv’s mind, Arya is the flag-bearer in the march of fanatics. The novel depicts that those who are in authority are either wary of confrontation of any kind, and give in easily, much like the character of head in the novel; or are in sync with the designs of the fundamentalists. Whatever be the case, it is ultimately the common-man who is at the receiving end of the fanatics’ ire, and who stands to lose. But to deal with “Arya and his band of pirates, looters of the past,” one has to be a ‘hero’ and Shiv is trying his best (Siege 40).

The past creeps into Shiv’s present in the form of the chapter on Basava, and the memories of his father that preoccupy him. He faces a perpetual inner turmoil about how to react to the calamity that has befallen him. He compares his own circumstances to those of his father and Basava, and finds himself trapped in the web of his own making, just like them. Basava dared to challenge the given and so did his father fight the war for freedom. Shiv tries to analyse what was wrong with portrayal of Basava, to cause the ruckus that he is in. he recalls that it was because of his revolutionary ideas that Basava was considered “A man obsessed with upsetting tradition. A dangerous man, a threat to
structure, stability, religion” (Siege 87). While, to the traditionalists he was a demon, his followers looked up to him as a deity. So, there are different ways of looking at him:

Wading through 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 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; 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 more than one body. (Siege 87)

This description reflects the difficulties of writing history. In this case, it becomes complicated because of the different ways in which one looked at Basava, producing varying accounts of his life as per one’s own perspective. Myths and legends mingle with history to produce a whole picture. But Shiv realizes that it is not easy to sort out what needs to be added to the compound whole. The selection and omission of material is determined by individual perspective, and so, differences in the overall account slink in. Shiv feels that it is difficult to take any one account of Basava’s life as authentic:

Is there a single image, a simple one that will hold his knowledge of Basava? Shiv imagines a hospitable tree, the kind that attracts all sorts of vines and creepers. It is impossible to look at this tree, visualize it in all its wealth of detail, if the vines and creepers are cut out of the picture ... The hagiographies—the creepers are an inevitable part of any construction, historical or literary, of Basava’s life. But—and Shiv pulls himself back from his verdant fantasy to the waiting Meena—the Aryas and Atres and all their thought-shrinking police pretend the parasite is the tree. They use the creepers to prettify the picture; whitewash it; or even better, use them like brushes dipped in magic paint. It’s safer that way. (Siege 91-92)

The writer has put the problem of choosing historical method quite impressively. Of course, the fundamentalists want to emphasize one aspect of Basava over the other. They do not want to show him as a revolutionary against caste and gender division, because these evils present the Hindu religion as oppressive. Showing Basava fighting against the practices which were the hallmarks of his religion at that time would not allow him to be
sanctified as a saint. The fundamentalists want a partial picture to prevail, so they can hide all ugliness from view. But hiding something does not obliterate it. Someone like Shiv dares to uncover it to present a wider and wholesome view.

Shiv reveres Basava as, “a man of his times, but also a man whose questions remain relevant eight hundred years later,” and who “helped create a new community; a new ethos, that provoked people to dare to experiment” (Siege 104). His father and Basava are two personalities who have a great effect on his bearing. The similarities between the two bring them to Shiv’s mind, together. Both met a similar end, though separated in time: “Like Shiv’s father, Basava disappeared. He was presumed dead. His end would always be shrouded by mysterious circumstances and speculation. Speculative narratives. Narratives of love or faith or revolution. But is all narrative doomed to be inconclusive?” (Siege 105). Shiv tries to find ‘conclusions’ once and for all, find the reasons behind the disappearance of each of them. He feels that their reasons were the same: Both envisaged a better world but were disillusioned at the results of their efforts. They died mysterious deaths, isolated from the world, traumatized at its shortcomings.

Shiv sees Basava standing by the river, considering it with mixture of love and wariness as if he can see truth in the river. Truth, that large map of abstraction so many men fight over, die for, is the size of a pinpoint—just a glimmer in a drop of water, part of the flowing stream. And what is this truth Basava sees in the river? That cross-currents can co-exist, that rapids and the most placid of waters are fellow travelers? Or that it is possible to move, to break free of gold-encrusted temples, customs and prejudices made of petrified stone, aspiring to stand like monuments for all time? (Siege 107)

Hariharan conveys her conclusion very succinctly; Basava through Shiv’s imagination is made to contemplate and reach the answer: ‘cross-currents can co-exist’. This paves the way for multiple perspective—heterogeneous ways of understanding something. The writer pushes the point that truth is only an abstraction, and fighting over it is a mindless exercise. Everyone can have one’s own truth, own perspective. Basava advocates a “many-faceted truth” (Siege 108).

But Shiv lives in different times, where Basava is reduced to a “banned history lesson” (Siege 156). Once bitten twice shy, Shiv is apprehensive about the history of the Vijayanagar Empire, on which he is planning to write a lesson. He wonders: “Is it
possible to write history—or anything else at all—if you have to worry about your masters’ objections, their venal sentiments?” He recalls his visit to Hampi, the ruins of the great empire: “The stories of Vijayanagar that awaited Shiv, the modern traveler in Hampi, were cast not only in words but also in granite; their plot was a slippery, perpetual engagement between history and myth” (Siege 157). Here again he mentions the interweaving of history and myth hinting that the former cannot be separated from the latter.

On his visit to Hampi ruins, Shiv is told by his Muslim driver, “It must have been beautiful. They shouldn’t have broken it down.” Shiv realizes that, “By ‘they’ he meant Muslims, his ancestors, what he had now been given to understand as his ‘side’. And he was offering Shiv an apology; Shiv was, in his eyes, a representative of the Hindu side.” His reaction shows that he assumes Shiv to be “a custodian of a mythicized Hindu past. A past reconstructed, complete with its glories and its suffering at the hands of foreign invaders, both equally evocative” (Siege 159). This episode reveals that anybody from the other religion is seen with prejudice. The world for a common man is divided between ‘them’ and ‘us’ In such an atmosphere, Shiv finds it difficult to write his lesson: “How is he to write about Vijayanagar city—either its glory or its fall—as if it exists in a safe vacuum, as if Basava and his hall, Shiv’s university and its history department, do not intrude?” (Siege 160).

The predicament that Shiv faces is a common phenomenon in the contemporary world where hate and intolerance are the key emotions.

Shiv would like to believe that it is Basava who links 1168 and 2000. Yet it seems it is not the dissident leader who is critical link, but the hatemongers; the same manches that have sprouted in two times, centuries apart. Just as Shiv’s history manch has taken apart his world and challenged him to put the pieces together again, Basava’s manch set his city on fire. (Siege 160-61)

Hariharan draws out clearly her purpose in posing the two different sets of circumstances together. The writer is justified in presenting mutual hatred as the common ground between the times of Basava and the present times of Shiv. Although Shiv musters confidence at the wisdom imparted by his father, and that gathered from Basava, he is still fearful of the confrontation. He has to face the present which is dreadful, and from which he cannot escape like his father or Basava: “In spite of his exhortations to courage,
his father’s life—incomplete, cut off without a legible end—is a tail-less example of a man with too much memory” (Siege 82). He realizes that he is in dire circumstances, which he has no choice but to face head-on.

The Itihas Suraksha Manch is one such group of fundamentalist hate-mongers whose wrath Shiv has to bear. A newspaper report reads:

The Itihas Suraksha Manch, an independent social and cultural organization, issued a statement on Wednesday in the capital calling for ‘an end to tempering with our precious and glorious Indian history’... ‘We will not allow our 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. How are these historians different from the Muslims who invaded our land? Every schoolchild knows the story of the Mohammeds, from Ghazni to Ghori. Muslim invaders have always tried to destroy Hindu pride and civilization. In the same way, these modern invaders pretending to be historians are attacking our system of traditions and our way of life that have stood the test of time ... We will make sure our history remains a way to show the world examples of our great Hindu past.’ (Siege 76)

The Manch is more of a pro-Hindu group than a ‘protector’ of history because it wants to preserve a history biased to impart the nation a glory ‘unpolluted’. In trying to display the past to be clean, the Manch wants to wipe out all signs of unseemly parts from it. It is actually the protectors of such partial history who distort it, not the historians like Shiv who want to present a wholesome account.

The chaos outside has a corresponding conflict in Shiv’s mind. Shiv feels suffocated, as if he is in a cast that “immobilizes him completely”:

It is not as if he is just being asked to prove he is a historian. It’s the other demands of proof—from two different corners of the ring—that freeze Shiv, slow his heart to a standstill. Proof on the one hand that he is patriotic, Hindu, Indian; proof on the other that he can say and do the right things, transform himself into a twenty-first century echo of the dissenting Basava. (Siege 88-89)
There are reverberations of the demolition mindset in the novel. Time and again, the Babri Masjid comes up as a metaphor for the values of secularism and tolerance which were given a death-blow along with the disputed structure. The dispute that started over the portrayal of Basavanna takes a new form at the hands of the fundamentalists. They call the lesson written by Shiv as “a part of a deep-rooted conspiracy to defame Hindu saints in particular and Hindu history and culture in general” (Siege 90). A leader of the Itihas Suraksha Manch accuses Shiv of many crimes:

He charged Prof. Murthy with deliberately picking up controversial strands of the Indian past like caste and targeting Brahmans and temples in his version of history. ‘There have been attempts for quite some time by so-called secular people, all of whom are interested in obtaining foreign funding, to project Hinduism in an incorrect and defamatory manner.’ (Siege 90)

This leader however, refuses to comment “when asked if non-historians could judge learning material produced by qualified scholars, or when asked if this was censorship of liberal voices in academia” (Siege 90). Obviously, the self-proclaimed protectors of history have nothing to say about this. The masses can easily be fooled by such propaganda, irrespective of the source.

Meanwhile, Basava is pushed even further behind as there are newspaper reports reading out loud: “Call to revive Hindu courage”:

We have to shed the cowardice that has grown in us with Muslims, then Europeans storming Indian shores. Though Hindus were among the bravest of the ancient people, repeated outside conquests have made them cowards. Even Mahatma Gandhi said so. We want to make the Hindu strong and courageous again. A meek person cannot survive. I am not only talking about muscle power. We must return to our old militant spirit if the Hindu nation is to become great again. (Siege 90)

The Hindu bigots ultimately come back to their basics; all their disgust is finally directed towards Muslims and the west. Hinduism is exalted, and strength – both physical and mental – to fight for the sanctity of their religion is invoked in the Hindus of the present times. What is genuinely offensive is no longer a function of the principle in question: it is determined by how much power a group can muster or how much violence it can threaten.
However, the lesson on Basava is withdrawn from circulation amid protests from academics:

They said it was ‘clear this was a response to the demands of the Manch. These demands actually add up to a plan to perpetrate a fictitious and homogenous “golden Hindu history” that will legitimize their programme of one language, one religion, one nation. We condemn the university’s failure to take a firm stand against this kind of blatant intellectual censorship, which can only lead to further targeting of secular historians.’

(Siege 93)

Shiv wonders how his “little lesson” could “grow to such epic proportions”; Meena tells him that it has taken larger significance:

Now it’s no longer caste and temple, or even contesting narratives of an enigmatic historical figure. Now the stage is littered with Muslim invaders, Christian missionaries, sons of the soil and foreigners. The stage has grown and grown till it is a battlefield big enough for the new patriots and their wild and warped nationalistic dreams.

Their dream sequences scorn the banal existence of well-known facts. Their imaginations work overtime concocting febrile memories: horse drawn chariots thousands of years before their invention. Hymns packed with occult allusions to high-energy physics and calculations of the speed of light. All part of a hoary, unashamedly golden past. A past *past-er* than anybody else’s, so how can it not be the cradle of all civilization? (Siege 94)

Once again, history is made a battle-field – same weapons, same armies, similar incentive – only the grounds are different; earlier it was the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid, and now its Basava. In the earlier case, Ram was made to pose as a national hero; this time Basava is to lose all identity but that of a saint. The same saga is repeated with history as a weapon of assault. Shiv is the focus of all rage and fury of the ‘protectors of history’ and others, too.

Charges are hurled at Shiv from all corners – the Manch, the head, the dean, the innumerable hate-mails. A historian representing the Manch says, “Sad to say, there seem to be scholars with vested interest who think the treasures of our past can be taken
away from us” (Siege 76-77). The past is made a ‘treasure’ locked safely in books of history; Shiv, the historian with the key to the treasure is accused of looting what he is supposed to protect. And so, the Manch has to take it upon itself to rescue the past from Shiv. A hate-mail addressed ironically to “Dear Respected Murthyji” reads:

If you want to rewrite Indian history with our Hindu saints as cowards 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.

… you are trying to undermine Hinduism. What are you trying to say?

That the Muslims are great? (Siege 77-78)

That a lesson on Basava is seen as showing the greatness of Muslims is a mystery. Showing Shiv the door to Pakistan has echoes of the Hindutva slogan for the nation of Hindus, sans Muslims, whose home is Pakistan. It is strange how Shiv is blamed for unpatriotic activities, when he has only written a lesson on Basava. The writer of the mail has made vague analogies, giving the issue the shape of a national calamity. The influence of knowledge passed down from fundamentalists is obvious. Another “professional hatemonger” goes:

It is high time our so-called historians presented Hinduism and its famous tolerance in its true light. This professor Murthy has made the great saint Basavanna a mere politician, appealing to caste and dividing society just like Mandal did some years back. Maybe the esteemed professor needs a refresher course in recent history? …

Our misled historians and other troublemakers criticize Hinduism for its caste system and pull our saints off their pedestals. But they keep quiet about Christianity or Islam. The truth is that these minorities will be safe in India only if they share our vision of our country and culture. Then we won’t mind accommodating two more gods (Allah and Christ) along with our thirty-three crore gods and goddesses. (Siege 117-18)

This letter from a “failed Oxon” seems to have read Madhav Sadashiv Golwalker’s We, or the Nationhood Defined. This book finds mention in the novel, too. Golwalker, the founder of one of the Hindutva parties in India expressed such views in the aforementioned book. The reference to the Mandal Commission of the early nineties, which created a loud uproar because of the reservation policy it suggested.

It is not just strangers who disapprove of Shiv’s work; his wife and daughter, too express their unhappiness in the whole affair. Rekha, his wife, is exasperated at his
involvement in the controversy, which is caused by his lesson; “And all for a correspondence course and some poet no one remembers.” She does not find it justifiable to get into trouble for what she finds a petty cause. This comes as another shock for Shiv from somebody his own: “Shiv has heard the subtext of Rekha’s words. A poet no one remembers. What she means is, what difference does it make? Whatever he said and did, he is dead and gone, and you are here and alive” (Siege 103). Probably, she does not realize that her husband holds Basava, like his father, in reverence. She wants him to forget them both as things of past and live and face the realities of the present.

Tara, Shiv’s daughter, who is in Seattle, is equally perturbed by what she thinks to be his father’s disrespect for Indian traditions: “It’s sort of weird and embarrassing to explain why you have written something against our temples and priests and all that. It’s only after coming to the US that many of us have learnt to appreciate Indian traditions” (Siege 112). It is clear that neither Rekha nor Tara is aware of Basava and they speak only from general impressions gathered from the information in circulation.

Hariharan compares the lesson on Basava to a vehicle carrying dangerous chemicals: “Caution! Highly inflammable medieval history. Only known antidotes: 500 mg of blissful ignorance or 250 mg of unadulterated lies.” Shiv, obviously, has not taken the necessary precautions and has to feel the heat now. He is reminded of Basava’s words and is overwhelmed with their significance in his condition: “If you risk your hand with a cobra in a pitcher, will it let you pass?” (Siege 86). Shiv has done just this, and has to face the music now.

But Shiv finds support from his colleagues Menon and Amita, and from Meena and her friends. These people put up a combined front of secularists to tackle the problem at hand. Meena and her friend Amar plan a rally to protest against the demands of the Itihas Suraksha Manch and the authorities who have called back the disputed lesson. They prepare a “hard-hitting leaflet” which reads: “The protection racket is not a new one in some parts of the country … These instances of protection have also familiarized us with the protectors’ preferred strategy. Convince people they are under attack, then offer them protection” (Siege 99). The Manch leaders are quoted and compared to Golwalkar from whom they draw inspiration. Meena wants to include Shiv’s views: “Something about history not yet being a protected, endangered species. And I think it would be good to bring in the German fascists again, considering how much Golwalkar admired them” (Siege 101). She reads it to them:
Perhaps we have not yet reached the pinnacle of atrocities committed during Kristallnasch, but it is impossible not to see a link. The link between fascism and the ugly faces of Hindutva unveiling themselves around us is the regimentation of thought and the brutal repression of culture. (Siege 101)

Hariharan builds up the comparison very well. Meena and her troupe appear to be a manifestation of the writer’s political self, giving words to her thoughts which she has expressed in her interviews. Even Shiv finds these words echoing his thoughts. But this is not all, and Amar suggests, “Think of them as an army” (Siege101). He goes on to elaborate his point:

‘The fundoo side has three regiments. The troops in front are the thugs. Lumpen types, rushing ahead with their prejudices like shields before them, waving hatred like angry lathis.’ … ‘Then behind these you have the ideawallas. The historians, the ideologues. A few politicians and pamphleteers on the make. Bringing up the distant rear is the pantheon of gods in power. These think they should run the government because they have a direct line to the mythical gods.’ (Siege 102)

Amar does a good job describing the various types of fundamentalists. Here, Shiv is troubled by all three – the Manch in the front, pseudo-historians, like Arya at the back and the political ‘higher ups’ supporting them.

Meanwhile, Shiv is faced with another challenging situation—a TV interview. Confused by the paraphernalia set up in his drawing room, he somehow manages to say, “The important thing to remember,”… “is that history, like the human mind, is a complex body with many strands. Ours is a rich, plural history. Of course all these threads must be repeatedly re-examined” (Siege 97). Shiv holds up a plural history, which can be re-read and interpreted in multiple ways, but without adding or deleting anything as the fundamentalists want. He cross-question his tormentors:

But why this sudden anxiety about a historical figure we have safely consigned to textbooks till now? And from such unlikely quarters? I can only think of one answer—a fear of history. A fear that our history will force people to see that our past, like our present, has always had critics of social divisions that masquerade as religion and tradition. So what do these
frightened people do? They whitewash historical figures, they seize history and restructure notions about— (Siege 97-98)

His speech is cut-short because of power-cut. But the gist of his words is obvious enough. He challenges the authenticity of those who have questioned his intentions as a historian. He is clear enough in the denunciation of such people as manipulative. It is they who distort history, not he.

Arya pressurizes the head to call another staff meeting in the department. The head starts with saying, “...the lesson has been sent to an expert committee for a fair, balanced review.” But he is interrupted by Amita who asks, daringly, “But do we know who these experts are?”, and this gives Shiv the courage to jump right to his point: “If the Manch is satisfied with this committee, the chances are the committee does not have a single historian we can take seriously. And what about the precedent we are setting? With the lesson and with the ‘suggestion’ for my resignation?” (Siege 125). Shiv’s straightforward approach takes everyone with surprise. What follows is an action-packed drama, as Arya takes it upon him to answer back:

The Manch represents public sentiment. 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 a hue and cry. (126)

To understand the statement by Arya, it is important to put it in a factual perspective. With reference to the controversy of a book edited by historians Sarkar and Panikker withdrawn from publication, as discussed above, it can be said that Hariharan seems to have borrowed from this episode. The year 2000, when this controversy erupted, the centre had BJP led NDA government. At that time, the chairman of ICHR (which so far had historians known to have secular ideology as chairmen) was B.R.Grover, who was known to have association with the RSS, an ally of the ruling party. In this context, rumours did rounds in academic and political circles that Grover could take the decision of calling the volume on freedom struggle back, with support from the ruling political party. Grover, who was later found to be guilty of misappropriation of documents, with his fundamentalist approach was a rare case in the position at ICHR. It is in view of all this that Hariharan makes Arya talk of the monopoly of secular historians being over with the change of party in power. This makes her text move even closer to reality. So, in real life as well in Hariharan’s novel, everything boils down to politics, not history as such.
However, Shiv denies the ‘Marxist’ tag, and the head takes his side: “I can assure you Dr Murthy’s no communist.” But, Arya is not easy to pacify: “There is the right side and there is the other side—whether these are Muslims or communists or Christians is all the same to him.” Everybody in the meeting puts in some effort to soothe the firing nerves of Arya. Menon advises him not to be emotional: “We are supposed to be talking about a history lesson, and we can’t have a discussion if we start drawing battle lines like this.” Arya is certainly upset with the moralizing, and “glares” at the head to give him the “cue” to speak up. The head says with some reluctance, “We do need to talk about this lesson’s implications. The question is, if our young people lose all sense of veneration for rishis, sages and saints, who should they look up to?” Another faculty member, the head’s “yes-man” says mockingly “Michael Jackson … McDonald’s culture with potatoes fried in beef tallow?” (Siege 126). Reacting to this, Shiv barely manages to say, “This is precisely the danger of pandering to any self-appointed preservers of culture,” when Arya attacks him physically (Siege 127). This drama comes to end when Arya goes out mumbling warnings. In this meeting, Arya comes out openly as a fundamentalist, and as Shiv’s adversary for the times to come.

This episode in the department makes Shiv wonder: “What makes a fanatic? A fundamentalist? What makes communities that have lived together for years suddenly discover a latent hatred for each other?” (Siege 129). Before he can find an answer, a hired mob comes to the department from where Shiv manages to escape with Menon’s help, but his room is ransacked: “His room has been pushed into no-man’s land. Like other disputed structures, it has a lock on the door. All it takes, it appears, is a simple little lock to keep history safe” (Siege 130). Hariharan brings up the Babri Masjid issue, this time with an oblique reference to a ‘disputed’ structure which too, was locked. So long as it was locked, the dispute was in a dormant state, and came up again when the Masjid was unlocked. Rest is history.

With each passing day, the atmosphere around Shiv becomes more oppressive and suffocating, too much for him to bear. There is too much to handle:

Vested interests. Hinduization of the past. History as armour. History as propaganda. History as battleground. History as the seed of hatred. History in the hands of the mob. Conspiracy theories. Rightist conspiracies, leftist conspiracies. Foreign-handed conspiracies. A Babel of voices is trapped in Shiv’s head, a play with a cast of thousands. These characters never stand
still; they run from meeting to rally to interview. All of them have something urgent to say, and they say it in as many words as possible. (Siege 132)

There is a lot of action around Shiv, and everybody is busy saying or doing something. Shiv tries to sort out the mess in his mind, separating one thought from the other, one historian from the other, one act from the other. Everyone with a little knowledge assumes airs:

Professor Fraudley, the eminent Indologist no one had heard of till six months back, has flown down to Delhi to make his contribution via newspapers and Web sites. ‘As an international expert on all matters Indian, I have no hesitation in saying that Indian culture has always been spiritual, and it must continue to keep its Spirituality Quotient (SQ) high.’ (Siege 132)

The name of the ‘eminent’ scholar is indicative of his merit. Hariharan plays with the adjective ‘eminent’ to show how mindlessly it is used for anybody irrespective of whether the person deserves it.

A war of wits has started and Amar is seen distributing leaflets asking boldly: “Is the past up for grabs?” On the other side of the front, “Arya’s hired students put up posters in reply: ‘Down with Foreign Craze! Long Live Patriotism!’” (Siege 132). Amir Qureishi, a historian contends, “Identities are never permanent. This obsession with identity uses the past to legitimize the political requirements of the present” (Siege 132-33). The Manch spokesman rubbishes him:

Who are these historians to talk when they don’t know the first thing about the past? Man first took birth in Tibet, originally a part of Bharat. All beings were Arya beings. It is from there that they spread out into fields. It is now 179 million crore, nineteen lakh, fifty-nine thousand and eighty-four years since man stepped on this earth. (Siege 133)

Everyone tries to show-off one’s learning and scholarship, indifferent to the import of his or her words, if any. Many voices are heard, few are comprehensible. Arya asks a rhetorical question: “Are these foreign-lovers nationals of our land?” and declares, “We will accept only people whose loyalty to our traditions and our heroes down the centuries is undivided and unadulterated.” Qureishi recalls the glory of the past: “The nationalism practiced by these sullen, resentful, intolerant men is very different from the
nationalism of the freedom struggle. This new brand of nationalism is monstrous.” The old man is certainly touched by the times; he has seen better days for sure. But against this, the Manch is bent upon mischief: “What can even a thousand policemen do when we emotionally charged people take to the streets?” (Siege 133). The fundamentalists know the limitations of the system, and how to use them to advantage.

This game of blames and allegations, actions and reactions, over a lesson of history makes Shiv feel that history, which used to be “a dull, safe choice of subject”, has in his times turned into “a live, fiery thing, as capable of explosion as a time bomb.” But Meena’s generation knows that “It’s got nothing to do with history. They’re just goondas looking for publicity,” and “know how important it is to use the past in the present” (Siege 134). The younger generation is certainly better informed about the political and social realities of the day. The past is used, rather misused, in the present to perpetuate false notions of religion and nation. Shiv, the historian chips in, “And perverting the collective memory may not help to write good history, but it helps to build national monuments” (Siege 135). There seems to be a never ending clatter of contesting voices, and Shiv loaded with hate-mails and advices and suggestions realizes:

Less and less, as controversy’s noise-making machine drowns out the voices of Basava and his truth-telling river. Basava is no longer the cause, though his name is bandied about by a few overnight experts. No one really remembers him—no one is struck by the stark, astonishing parallels between his time and the present—in the midst of argument and counter-argument, threat and retaliation. (Siege 135-36)

Hariharan depicts the historian turning into history, used only for specific purposes. Nobody asks him what he thinks or feels. There is a tug of war around him, two sides pulling him apart. They started off as two teams, Shiv on one side with his group of young activists and a few colleagues. But eventually, he is left alone, in the middle of two teams each vying to outdo the other. He watches helplessly as Meena and her team of activists decides the course of action on how to take on the religious fundamentalists. He has the urge to ask them: “If this can happen to an ordinary, cautious man like me, what about you ideologywallas?” but, “Luckily, no one seeks Shiv’s opinion. It seems enough that he is there, a symbol, or a statue around which living, talking people gather to make plans” (Siege 136). Shiv is known to have a balanced approach. Even the head of his department accepts that, and gives him the charge of BA history course, to avoid any
extremist views. Although Shiv writes an unbiased account of Basava, he is caught in this mess. The young brigade though is strongly opinionated, and is no less fundamentalist than the rival religious fundamentalists. They are secular fundamentalists. Shiv feels that he belongs nowhere, he cannot identify with either side. Ironically, he is side-tracked, just like Basava.

‘Eminent’ personalities from all walks of life are invited to share their views in the “broad front” rally. Qureishi contributes an article in which he “tears apart all this nostalgia for the past, what he calls the essentialized past” and criticizes it as “crude glorification of anything pre-modern and traditional” (Siege 141). With such ideology to back them, the young activists set out to march—“one gang of fundoos against another” (Siege 142).

Amar, is not enthusiastic about the mad play of shallow ideology.

And all this talk of We are the same, we are one, etcetera, is just so much government-style talk. There’s class, caste, religious community, gender, language—everything makes for difference. But have you noticed, whether it is the government or the cinema, everyone wants to tame this diversity. (Siege 142)

Meena suggests accepting the individual differences, wishing at the same time, “But can’t we remain different and still have a language or two in common? Can’t we have more than one voice or one identity?” (Siege 142). It is through these characters that Hariharan suggests remedies for the malaise resulting from the narrow identities along the lines of caste, or religion, or for that matter ideology, booming in the country. Not just rhetoric, but firm belief and action to accept plurality as the truth of Indian reality is the solution to the growing communalization of society and politics.

During the rally, amidst mounting action and voices rising to shout slogans, Shiv is aware of his odd presence in the march. A typical slogan amuses him:

‘Hitler ki thi kisse yaari?’ The answer to this question—Who were Hitler’s friends?—comes back with an enthusiastic cheer from the marchers: ‘Knickerdhaari, Knickerdhaari.’ Shiv thinks of Arya’s following of khaki-knicker bigots and he is overwhelmed by a great liberating urge to shout out loud. (Siege 143)
Hariharan has compared the fundamentalists to Hitler and his Nazis, many times in the text, emphasizing the similarity between the tyrants. ‘Knicherdhaari’ points at the members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh who wear khaki knickers as uniform. The writer has stayed away from using real names but has given important cues that make the identity of the contemporary fundamentalist groups obvious.

The public meeting that follows the rally turns out to be a big event attended by my scholars and historians, activists from varied fields. But the writer brings out the uselessness of such marches by showing that there were people carrying banners with meaningless slogans, which they carry to every such event. She points out the insignificance of such events which are no more than mass hysteria, senseless and futile. The pettiness of the march is proved by a “forty-five second” coverage that it gets on TV; but Meena thinks differently “the government has even these glitzy private channels in its pocket” (Siege 146). She may be right, but still the obvious cannot be denied. The TV channel rather shows the VC of KGU being interviewed, in which he zeroes down everything to “security”: “I was shaying, it’s all a question of security. We’ve shet up a committee” (Siege 147). The VC’s concerns are no more than tightening the security in the campus, without much contemplation of the cause behind the real affair.

In this din of sounds and images flashed on him, Shiv feels like “an endangered species whose natural habitat has been taken over” (Siege 150). He feels lost, and the subject of history which he used to teach is changing, too.

History, its layered terrain of past merging into present, shrinks to the size of a module, a black-and-white booklet of lessons. Then that too 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 seesaw: saint versus leader, saint versus man. Golden age versus dark ages. Hindu versus Muslim, Hindu versus Christian, anti-Hindu, pro-Hindu. Secularist, pseudo-secularist, soft Hindu, rabid Hindu. (Siege 150)

Hariharan presents the wrong side of the society clutching to narrow identities—every individual with a unique identity demanding his type of the world—the variety he likes the most. There are so many variants competing for space on the shelf, too narrow to
give each brand a separate space. But nobody wants any but his favourite brand; but the problem is that other varieties cannot be done away with and they have to be there. And this causes problems for the selfish consumer in this capitalist world looking for profit.

The text emphasizes that there are multiple ways of knowing, understanding and appraising the past. All the pandemonium in that the novel depicts is because of refusal to accept a given version of history as true. But the writer makes Shiv, who is inspired by Basava, advocate the acceptance of various perspectives of knowing the past but without being partial. Shiv would have the fundamentalists think rationally, but he can’t, because nobody bothers to listen to him. He recalls Basava: “If there is only one way to know ideas or people or the past, why bother with knowing?” (Siege 150).

At one point Shiv thinks of “Rashomon, or some such cleverly constructed film where the whole truth remains stubbornly elusive. Where even a semblance of truth can only be reached obliquely, by painfully piecing together fragments of stories told by different people of the same event” (Siege 153). The allusion to the film is significant because it emphasizes truth as many-faced, offering a different view to each onlooker. It further reaffirms Shiv’s point of view about truth and its representation in the form of history.

Shiv’s wife and daughter move even farther away from him emotionally, leaving him all by himself. Rekha dissuades him from holding on to his decision, fearing violent consequences:

‘I do see you can’t give in so easily,’ she said. ‘It’s not as if I don’t see the principle of the thing. But to be idealistic at such a time, and with such people!’ … ‘Don’t forget, you’re 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? And they’re so powerful now. What can we do—Shiv, don’t you understand? I’m afraid.’ (Siege 154-155)

No doubt, Rekha’s fears are justified. The Babri Masjid once again comes up as a symbol of the values that the nation upheld, and which were demolished with the disputed structure. The fundamentalists could not be contained; their hostility was extreme. No law could stop them from giving shape to their violent aspirations. They are capable of doing anything even in Shiv’s times. In fact, even more powerful ‘now’, with so much
experience, and consent of the ruling government, which Hariharan has hinted at. Shiv, too, is fearful, after an anonymous phone call; the caller warns him saying that “no one was out of their reach” (Siege 156).

Tara, Shiv’s daughter is distanced from him, physically and mentally. She is indifferent to the contemporary realities of India, and her father’s circumstances: “It all happened long ago, didn’t it? Only professors are obsessed with details. The rest of us only need to know enough to be proud of our past” (Siege 166). She does not realize that the past continues in the present; it is not left behind. Besides, not everything in the past is worth feeling proud of. Hariharan has portrayed her in contrast to Meena, who is politically aware. They belong to the same generation, but one is opposite of the other. And Shiv is caught between such opposites.

Shiv grieves over all the selfish acts of destruction around him, the Babri Masjid never out of his mind: “The mosques and churches desecrated or burnt or broken down in the last decade; and closer in time, closer home, his own little room at the university. Contemporary acts of war” (Siege 161-62). Every incident that Shiv recalls is a ‘war’ against history, an attempt to undo history. Hariharan links them all, one follows the other, a continuation of the demolition of Basava’s Hall of Experience – his great democratic experiment. The demolition of the Masjid finds an echo in the novel time and again. Shiv finds the demolition replayed in his dream; Arya representing the fundamentalists, hands him a “pickaxe” telling him to “wait for orders”. Like it is in dreams, Hariharan uses symbols for the act, too familiar to be vague. There are ‘pickaxes’, ‘hammers’, ‘iron rods’, the weapons of assault on the building which has ‘domes’. He can see a crowd going haywire, a “jumble of flashing yellow and orange clothes, flags, banners” and can hear voices, “exhorting the crowd to do their duty” (Siege 163). And then, “through the ghostly haze of fire and smoke he sees a dozen men brandishing rods and flags on the building roof. Then the dome comes down.” Shiv’s nightmare is a manifestation of the fear of the present, with its Aryas capable of ‘anything’. His father’s ghost asks: “How many more times?” (Siege 164). Shiv wonders if it is his turn this time to give in to “bloodthirsty munchies”. Hariharan reveals this fear in him:

But the nightmare has an undeniable aftertaste: a nagging fear that the night’s ugly secrets will not stay within bounds. That if Shiv is not careful,
the hatred he witnessed, the scenes of destruction, may leak into the day that waits downstairs for him. (Siege 165)

A newspaper editorial titled “Whither History?” sums up the issue. It declares boldly, “What makes this an ominous development is that there seems to be tacit sanction from the powers that be for any lunatic fringe that does its dirty work.” Strikingly, the term ‘lunatic fringe’ is used for some fundamentalist leaders for their extremism in the Ayodhya dispute. Further, “Even despots have fought shy of openly declaring they are rewriting history. But what used to be secretive has become respectable government policy, with textbooks being ‘rewritten’ to give them a certain slant.” This statement bears reference to the NDA government’s policy to work out changes in certain parts of NCERT history textbooks, to highlight the so-called contribution of Hindutva leaders to the freedom struggle of India. This caused a lot of hue and cry from the secular academia. The edit calls this an attempt to “deny the composite nature of Indian culture” (Siege 169). It affirms:

We seem condemned to endless replays of the demolition mindset. The Babri Masjid was first marked as a ‘disputed structure’, then demolished ‘to set right historical wrong.’ This time round, what is being marked as disputed territory, what is being assaulted with a view to demolition, is not just academic freedom.

... It is the right of a people to a complex, pluralistic history. It is true that history is not an indisputable body of knowledge. But history itself shows us that attempts to ‘rectify’ it have all too often been camouflage for the doctoring of history. (Siege 170)

Hariharan has her protagonist take a stand against such attempts of denying history any heterogeneous aspects. Shiv finds his determination pushing him ahead without help from anybody. Like Meena going away without her crutches, Shiv too, is bereft of any mental support. Once alone, he shooes away every fear and doubt. All by himself, he is now liberated: “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” (Siege 194).
The novel, thus, is all about the interpretation of history. How truthful are the historical accounts we read in history books? How valid is their claim to authenticity? Hariharan, taking the example of an academician’s struggle to hold on to his principles of scientific objectivity, highlights the problems such an effort can run into. History, or truth, is many-faceted and so may be interpreted in as many ways as there are concerned parties, each contesting its own validity. Using a historical backdrop, In Times of Siege tries to highlight this issue, drawing our attention to the thin border-lines separating history/truth and fiction/distortion.