

Kerala sitting judge A M Basheer pens novel

[Jul 7](#)

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(New Delhi, Jul 7, 2013) Kerala civil judge A M Basheer was a trifle hesitant to pen his debut novel on a sensitive topic like communal violence fearing he would be too even handed but ultimately chose to go ahead with it as he wanted it to throw light on the plights of the underprivileged.

The result was *Riot Widows*, a book which is described by Union minister Shashi Tharoor as “heart-wrenching in its simplicity” and “a movingly crafted tale about growing up amidst adversity, suffering and pain”.

“I was hesitant to begin with. I toyed with the idea and then gave up, and again, the story came back to me. At one point I knew I would have to write it down. There was no escape from it. Being a judge was an additional burden. My fear was not that I would overstep the limits. My fear was I would be too even handed,” Basheer told PTI.

“This book shows how humanism, empathy with fellow human beings and love triumph over hatred and hostility. So, there is really no contradiction between my role in delivering judgements in court and writing a true account of contemporary life,” he says.

According to the author, his novel, published by Palimpsest, has no resemblance to any incident anywhere but the characters are typical of any underprivileged quarters in a city everywhere.

“I was very particular that it should throw light on the plights of the underprivileged.”

He had to take permission of the Kerala High Court for writing the book.

“I do not think there is any other instance of a sitting judge taking up his pen to write a work of fiction. Though I was not inhibited by my responsibility as a judge, I was all the time acutely aware that my work must be as fair as possible in giving every side its due,” he says.

Why did he choose such a sensitive topic?

“The issue of communalism always troubled me and in this book I have sought an answer by dissecting every cause that leads to a situation in which a man attacks his neighbour. I have been as ruthlessly impartial and even-handed as possible in dealing with the issue. I needed to write this book because I was seeking answers to many questions bothering me.

“I always worried about how the other half lived on the margins of our society. We always ignore the marginalised. Here I spot a slum where men are either the victims or the culprits. Then what about the women and children in their homes? They struggle to survive and their survival instincts compel them to move on. I visualise the situation where all religions live in unison,” Basheer says.

“This is a novel written in the tradition of great Malayalam writers like Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai and Vaikom Muhammad Basheer. The tone is folksy and the focus is on simple ordinary people. That way ‘Riot Widows’ is a departure from the trends in contemporary writing which is preoccupied with urban life,” he says.

Riot Widows is Basheer’s first novel and also his first attempt to use English as the medium for creative writing.

“Perhaps I opted for English because of the novel’s universal message. One can probably discern autobiographical elements in it. For example, the protagonist in the story is a judge too. But almost every writer picks up a few experiences from his own journey and employs them in fiction. I am no different.”
