

A thriller with a crisply military logic

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Blowback is Mukul Deva's latest offering to fans of Indian thrillers that use terrorism in the subcontinent as a running theme. His earlier works like *Lashkar* and *Salim Must Die* also deal with cross-border terrorism and have proved to be very popular. The reasons behind their success can be several, amongst them, an ability to tell a certain kind of story full of excitement and suspense, in addition to touching a chord in the hearts of the Western-educated middle-class that is overwhelmingly Hindu and, perhaps supportive of, without even being aware, of both the marginalisation of the Muslims since Partition in 1947 and their subsequent demonisation.

Deva is a former officer of the Sikh Light Infantry. He served in the Army for a little over 15 years and took early retirement in 1996. He is at home with the phenomenon of terrorism, particularly that concerning India and Pakistan, and, of course, Afghanistan. The role of the United States of America in creating an unholy mess in the region does not escape his attention.

He is, however, a former Army officer, and like his peers across the world, regardless of national and personal political beliefs, wants discipline and peace above all else, to run an efficient, clean 'system'. This is quite understandable in a former soldier and this attitude dictates the form of his novel and also gives the narrative a sense of urgency.

It is a story in keeping with the current American style of thriller writing. There are multiple plot twists and conflicts of interest involving individuals, groups, nations and nationalities. A warlord of overweening ambition wants to bring various terror outfits together under his command to take on American forces bolstered by those of NATO who have occupied Afghanistan. He seems to have the support of Inter Services Intelligence, Pakistan's notorious spy agency whose role at home is both ambiguous and dubious. Pakistan, after New York 9/11, has been constantly under pressure from its far more powerful ally, the US, to keep the homegrown Jihadis in check and prevent Islamic terror groups from using it as a base. Force 22, in the novel, with its two Muslim Bravehearts, Tanaz and Iqbal, go across the border into Pakistan in search of the diabolic Salim who can destabilise major parts of India.

The plot gallops along with its usual quota of blood and gore and all ends well... sort of. Tanaz leaves behind her newborn son by Iqbal, surviving inhuman torture at the hands of her captors just to give birth in her native land. She dies, a true patriot's death. The baby is adopted by Anbu, the senior member of Force 22, who promises Iqbal that he shall bring up the infant as his own. Through the last exhortation of Iqbal's, the author conveys his message about his novel thus: "... Please bring him up as a god-fearing person, but let his god have no name, let his god have no religion." It is a surprisingly touching statement from a man who has lived by the gun, indeed having been forced to do so.

It is interesting to note that the piece of dialogue quoted is reminiscent of an old Sahir Ludhianvi film song, *Na Hindu Banega Na Musalman Banega/ Insaan ki Aulad Hai Ye Insaan Banega* (Be neither Hindu nor Musalman/born of the human race/ be a human!)

The emotive quality in Deva's writing is powerful and the logic crisply military. He seems to suggest through his characters that Mother India is under threat from within and without therefore it is the duty of every right thinking Indian to fight and defeat all the fissiparous forces responsible. It is this earnestness in the writing that takes away from it and makes it less believable though not less real in its essence. This trait persists in most of the thrillers in the genre. Even Tom Clancy would agree.

One must be the devil's advocate and say that it is singularly unfair to expect from Deva's writing qualities he does not possess, namely the philosophical depth and acuity found in John le Carre's work from his early and middle period. He had till early middle-age worked for British Intelligence and acquired his deeply pessimistic worldview there. Deva, on the contrary, worked as an infantry officer in the Indian Army and despite his experience in the field could not get over his overt patriotism; he did not have to because he managed to find a pretty large readership at home.

Without being vulgar or patronising, one may be permitted to muse about the reader who finds thrillers like Blowback entertaining: Who is he or she? Would such a person for instance find the thrillers of the American Robert B Parker entertaining? It is true that Parker does not write about terrorism, international or homegrown, but he writes compellingly about American society and its vices and is a considerable commercial success. Both write about societal neuroses but Deva's nose does not seem to be close enough to the ground.

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