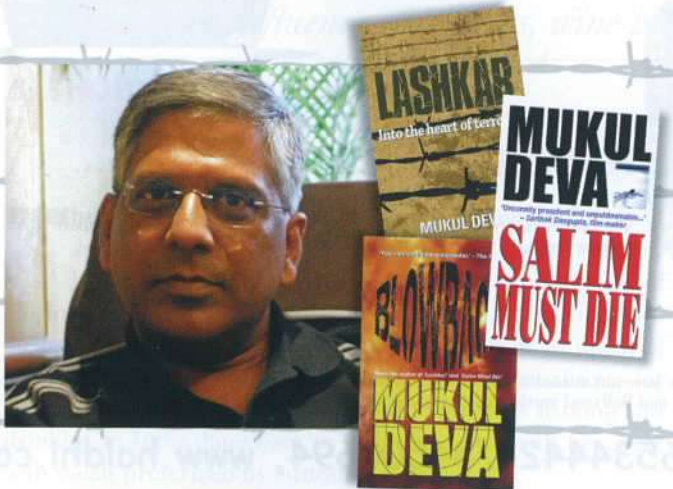


From the COMBAT ZONE

Mukul Deva's action-packed thrillers have become best-sellers.

By EIKA CHATURVEDI BANERJEE



If you can imagine it, you can achieve it – is the mantra that Mukul Deva, India's Tom Clancy, lives by.

Born to one of the first woman doctors in Uttar Pradesh, he grew up in Lucknow. After schooling at La Martinere, he was made to believe that he would not have to study if he joined the army (which "was grossly wrong as they make you study far more than is good for you"). Thus he joined the National Defence Academy, and was commissioned into the Sikh Light Infantry Regiment of the Indian Army in 1981.

After a combat-filled army career spanning 15 years in myriad action zones such as Siachen, Jammu & Kashmir, Nagaland and Sri Lanka – he took premature retirement as a Major in 1996 to set up his own security firm.

Deva insists that he had wanted to write since he was a child, but evidence suggests otherwise. His first book was published in 2000 and his works include racy reads (*Time After Time*), corporate wisdom and self-help books (*S.T.R.I.P.T.E.A.S.E.*, *M.O.D.E.L.*), coffee table books on cinema (*Women In Indian Cinema*), and military action thrillers (*Lashkar*, *Salim Must Die*). Coming up next in January 2010 is *Blowback*.

Deva recently shifted to Singapore making it his new base. Here are excerpts of a freewheeling chat with **India Se**.

India Se: Have you, in your personal and military experience, felt the need for the Indian army to be more assertive and proactive?

Mukul Deva: The Indian army is one of the most apolitical and centre-of-the-road armies in the world. It does not get involved in politics at all. The military wing of India is silent till the politicians bring it into use.

The rules of engagement that the Indian armed forces follow in our country, and in other countries, are far more considerate of collateral damage than any other force in the world.

There was a global Special Forces contest a couple of year's back, in which two teams from India participated. One team came first, and the other came third. The commanding officer of the team that came third broke his leg on the first obstacle

and had to be carried through the remaining course, because the rule was that the whole team has to reach the end together. Such is the tenacity and spirit of the Indian Army.

I do not agree with the Indian Government policy of 'passive defence'. Defence does not win wars. To win a war you have to aggressive and hit the enemy where and when it hurts – which is what my book *Lashkar* does.

IS: So tell us more about Lashkar and Salim Must Die.

MD: The Sarojini Nagar bombing happened in 2005 killing many. That ignited anger in me. Having been on the other side of the fence I knew how counter-terrorism could have responded but did not. I had seen the Indian government consistently failing to respond. That is when I wrote *Lashkar*. It was meant to clear the cobwebs - to explain who was doing it and why...that Pakistan actually has a regular intelligence operation (called Operation TOPAC) dedicated to such acts of terror. I wanted to bring out all that and also to highlight that there was another way to deal with a strike like this which was predictive, could be done, is being done by other countries. Something that we have the military capability for, but not the political will.

The reason these books were positioned as action thrillers was because more people read fiction than non-fiction. Also, some publishers told me that this genre had not been explored in India. In fact, *Salim Must Die* was ready and written even before *Lashkar* hit the stands. These books have been conceptualised as a series of four. *Blowback* releases in Jan 2010 and the last one *Tanzim* in Jan 2011.

I did eight months of research on *Salim* – to make sure that everything, geopolitical, weaponry, forensic, tactics is correctly explained. Also because I have a social responsibility, I altered the bomb-making descriptions. In *Salim* the action takes place across 11 countries and 11 time zones, and it was a challenge arranging the events sequentially and logically. I still retain the excel spreadsheet for *Salim* that spans across 432 columns!

Both books have been translated into the Hindi language and doing very well. I also have a few very serious bids from a moviemaker and a TV serial maker.

IS: What is your favourite part of both Lashkar and Salim Must Die?

MD: The part where my name is written – on the cover.

IS: What is it that drives you and motivates you in your daily life?

MD: The journey. For me it is always the journey.

IS: So how did Singapore happen?

MD: The National Arts Council sponsored my PR application. It's a great place to be in and I enjoy it here. The 15-year mandate with my company in India was over so I have handed over the reins to my partner, and assist him from here, as required. I needed a change; to grow.

IS: Is there a retirement plan?

MD: Of course, when I die. ☑

COMING IN JANUARY!

A book launch cum discussion with Mukul Deva go to www.indiaseonline.com for more details.