

Crossing the line of control

STRIKE FORCE A homegrown thriller on home-grown terror. It doesn't get more novel than this

pointblank



Blowback
Mukul Deva
HARPERCOLLINS
■ RS 199 ■ PP 350

Rajiv Arora

■ rajiv.arora@hindustantimes.com

Writing on 'national problems' is usually a tricky affair, especially since old wine can be sold in an old bottle with a new label *only* if you know the tricks of the trade. But things get trickier when it comes to an overdone, so-what-if-it's relevant issue like Islamic terrorism in India. More often than not, the self-styled pundits tend to reduce other experts to the status of pests that get grounded with the wheat.

But it's not easy to stomp on Mukul Deva's latest fare, *Blowback*. His insightful writing is lucid and his experiences as a former army man give Deva an advantageous vantage point: he can play political commentator and soothsayer of national defence *and* novelist without anyone really raising his eyebrows. After *Lashkar* and *Salim Must Die*, Deva's readers by and large know what to expect from the 'expert': a heady cocktail of chill and thrill, military jargon, an encyclopaedic litany of weapons and military tactics, and, of course, an overdose of 'Jai jawan!' patriotism.

So for the story. After their stint in

Pakistan, Agent Iqbal, Commander Anbu and Force 22 — "India's secret strike group" — return in *Blowback*. It's the same ingredients again in the mixie: India versus Islamic terrorism; good guys versus bad guys; religion versus national pride. But this time, it's a new recipe. In his unique style of fictionalising real threats, the focus in *Blowback* shifts to the Indian Mujahideen (IM), the 'local' faction of the Pakistan-based terror group Lashkar-e-Tayyeba, and its exploitation of misguided Indians.

A series of bomb blasts in Ahmedabad send ripples in the power circles in Delhi and a high-level meeting is convened. The detailed discussion that the prime minister has with the Core Crisis Committee gains importance. And it's here that Deva's understanding of the 'status quo' makes the 'fictitious' bits lean closer to the very palpable reality of India's relations with its neighbours.

Iqbal and fellow agent Tanaz — now his wife — agree to find leads on the IM as undercover agents. The scene shifts to Pune and Iqbal becomes part of the faction led by Asif, helping him in missions while not forgetting that his real task is to bust the group at the right time.

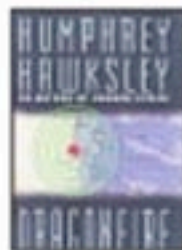
The perceptive details on bomb-making or on how an MQ-1B Predator is different from a Reaper weapon system notch up things in the excitement barometer. Real life incidents like the famous Batla house encounter and bombings in Jaipur and Varanasi are deftly injected into this high-paced narrative.

The only downside comes with Deva's handling of emotions, which, in true military style, is hot-footed. And I guess, it's part of the soldier's hardwired habit of 'sticking to the rules', so what if he's done something as unsoldierly as write a story book.



■ NOW THERE'S AN IDEA: Suspected Indian Mujahideen militants under arrest in Delhi

AFP



ALSO READ

DRAGONFIRE: Humphrey Hawksley brings closer the threat of another World War as India, China and Pakistan slug things out in this thriller