

# Behind enemy lines

Mukul Deva, whose ground-breaking *Lashkar* series are India's first military thrillers, is a quintessential literary storm-trooper **By Jauymini Barkatakya**



Aftermath of the 2005 Sarojini Nagar Market bomb blasts which led Mukul Deva to write his *Lashkar* series

**W**hen an ex-army officer writes a book, you usually expect a memoir or a didactic tome on conflicts, relations and strategies. Mukul Deva is ex-army and he has authored books. But that is where the comparison with the others end. His books are fast-paced thrillers that have broken new ground in Indian writing. His work represents the beginning of Indian literature's venture into fictional military thrillers.

An alumnus of the La Martiniere College,

Lucknow, the National Defence Academy, Pune and the Indian Military academy in Dehradun, he joined the Sixth Light Infantry of the Indian Army in 1981. He retired after a decade of service and set up MSD Security, which provides security services in India. But fate beckoned him to his first love - writing.

Delving in such diverse genres as management, corporate warfare, Indian cinema and crime fiction, he has authored seven books, the most famous among them being the *Lashkar* series.

Comprising of four books beginning with *Lashkar*, followed by *Salim Must Die* and, just recently published, *Blowback*, the series is an explosive, high-adrenaline tale of terrorism and counter-terrorism in India. All published by HarperCollins, the fourth book in the series *Tanzeem* is slated to hit the stands next year. The books have become an instant hit with readers who have longed for military and espionage thrillers set in an Indian background.

Deva has passed over

the highfalutin language, preferring, instead, to write in a simple narrative style that grips the reader without compromising on the quality and content in the least. This can be attested by the fact that his portrayal of the country's intelligence services and weapons technology is simply light years ahead of what any Indian author till date has attempted to write about.

**How did you foray into writing?**

I have always been very fond of writing. I think it was in my eight grade

that I first thought of being a writer, or more accurately, a storyteller. Of course, it took much longer for the ambition to fructify due to simple practicalities of life.

**Were you a voracious reader in your childhood? Who were your favourite authors and what were your favourite books?**

Yes, I was reading all the time. I grew up with Enid Blyton, Biggles, Chase, Harold Robbins, PG Wodehouse and, of course, Shakespeare. At that time my absolute favourite was anything written by Wodehouse. Even now I can just pick up one and laugh my way through it.

**Was it hard to find a publisher at first?**

Yes, it was, but from my second book onwards I have been absolutely lucky. Every book has found a publisher without any hassle.

**What is your approach to writing a book? How long do you take to complete a novel, starting from the first draft to the final manuscript?**

I normally start with a three to four page synopsis and then take it forward to a 30 page layout, which actually formats the book in detail. From this I draw a research list and it is only after I finish the research that I actually move on to writing the book. From start to finish my books take an average of 11 to 12 months. I had decided that one book of the *Lashkar* series will release every year and I do dedicate a minimum of four hours everyday to writing.

**Action-packed thrillers have never exactly been an Indian writer's forte. But you managed to break that myth...**

Strange, isn't it, that no one from a country with such a rich military tradition should be writing military action thrillers. But possibly, not so strange either since there is a huge technical construct to military thrillers and it entails lots of research as well as in-depth knowledge of military strategy and tactics. I guess my army background has a huge role to play in, my being able to 'break this myth.'

**Is it just your army background or a lot of research that accounts for the depth of your information on weapons technology and counter-terrorism?**

It's a combination of both. My background as an infantry officer, sufficient combat experience and a lot of research makes this possible. On an average I spend about two hours a day on research - I have been doing so for the last four to years.

**How much of the content in your books is based on your own experiences or that of someone you know?**

Every book does reflect the personal experiences of the author, so do mine. I also draw on the experiences of my colleagues from my time in the army.

**How did the *Lashkar* series and the characters of Iqbal, Tanaz and others develop?**

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**I wanted people to know the reality of the terror problem that India faces. I also wanted them to know that a suitable response is possible**

I also wanted them to know that a suitable response is possible. If our politicians just had the will. It may not eliminate the problem totally, but it will make a terrorist think a hundred times before he decides to strike at us. If he knows that we will hunt him down should he strike at us.

**Why did the Sarojini Nagar blasts affect you so much?**

The sheer lack of response from our government angered me hugely. New Delhi has consistently let the people of India down. We lack the political will to defend ourselves. Over the years, we have repeatedly proven that we are ready to be a soft target and that is what emboldens the terror groups and, of course, Pakistan, which supports them and uses

terror as an instrument of state policy.

**How do you balance writing about such different topics as business leadership, women in Indian cinema to corporate warfare and crime fiction?**

I suppose the changing genres are a reflection of my personal journey and have happened as I evolved, as a person and a writer. I look at myself as a storyteller who is profiling the times we live in. My business and leadership books happened because I had applied the principles of war and leadership to business and found they worked well, which is why I felt the need to write about them. Once I started the terror series and then crime, I found myself fascinated by the dark side of human nature.

**How do you manage all your varied interests: writing, MSD Security and CANassist?**

I live life by the simple mantra - If you can imagine it, you can achieve it. As the Bhagwad Gita tells us, everything in the world is created twice; first in the mind and then on the ground. MSD Security, my foray into the business world, happened since I needed the fiscal freedom to write.

A high standard of ethics and the acknowledgement of the fact that if you look after your people the company will grow, enabled it to succeed. Then, as I evolved, I felt the need to pay back to society and that's how I set up CANassist, where I have simply leveraged