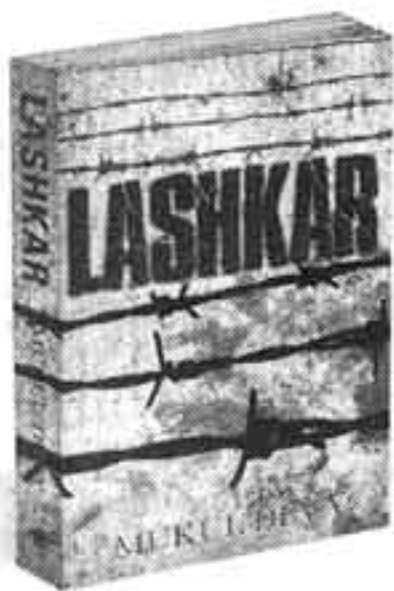


As you sow, so shall you reap

The story of the novel describes how a terrorist is led down the garden path by his half-baked doctrines and beliefs



Lashkar

Mukul Deva

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Vatsala Vedantam

MUKUL DEVA has written his novel with style and panache. As an alumnus of La Martiniere College in Lucknow, he has, in his own words "used his alma mater as a backdrop" for his story. And he has achieved the desired effect of shock and disbelief. For, this is a story of violence, death and tragedy set against the milieu – of all places – of the peaceful environs of a missionary institution! The young protagonist, whose tragic life is played out in barely 365 pages, is also a student in the same institution where, to his mortification, his father works as an assistant to the drill master – "something which the rich brats in his class seldom let him forget." Its almost as if the author was trying to tell us that it is such places that shape vulnerable young men into victims of strange ideologies.

Here, Iqbal, a sensitive, obedient boy receives his early education which included the mandatory religious lessons he learnt in the tranquil atmosphere of the school chapel. From the serene "namby-pamby" sermons of this Roman Catholic cloister, he is transported to the rousing prayers of a maulvi in the mosque. He feels attracted to the latter, not only because it arouses lofty feelings of piety, but also because of its "harsh" realism.

The maulvi also sensed the young boy's response, and impressed upon him the need to find educated young men like him who were also believers for the "cause." Thus, Iqbal moved from the prim confines of La Martiniere's to the grim realities of the world around him.

His story moves rapidly there-

after. From Delhi to Kathmandu where he is given a new passport, name and identity. Iqbal's missionary school background does not permit him to ask unnecessary questions. It is only when he flies out to Karachi and is taken in a jeep to a training camp in Muzaffarpur, that the truth slowly begins to dawn. There are guns everywhere, and men in uniform.

Iqbal understands that they are fighting for a "cause." But what cause and against whom is still a mystery. Just as his parents thought that their lucky son had found a "fantastic"

job in a middle east company, the young novice from Lucknow's fancy school thinks he has landed one of the plums. If someone had told Iqbal that he was actually a trainee with the dreaded terrorist outfit Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) he would have looked bewildered.

All he knew was that this school was unrelenting with its gruelling physical training sessions where he was made to run miles before daybreak with weights tied to his back. They taught him to handle dummy

guns. Then, he saw the town of Musharrabad demolished in a flash. Iqbal's first taste of death and suffering sent him reeling. Religion, war, guns, bombs, jihad....became by words in this mad "dance of death." The innocence of La Martiniere fell away, and in its place a cruel, unfeeling world lay exposed before the young boy's eyes.

But, this is not just the story of the LET. Lashkar can be found in any place or person. We all carry a bit of it and cloak it as spirituality. If the *maulvi* incited it in young men in mosques, others can do it too in temples or churches. Terrorism has no boundaries is what Deva seems to conclude in this highly readable book.

Even as Iqbal and his associates blow up a cyber café and kill men, women and children, some other passionate young man is busy blowing up a market place in New Delhi. The inevitable happens at last. The young terrorist loses his own mother and sister to another terrorist's country bomb. While Iqbal kills a mother somewhere for his ideologies, the scene repeats itself with sickening alacrity. Is there a message in all this? Iqbal, the promising graduate from an elite school, ends his sad journey "somewhere along the line of control in Kashmir.

Mukul Deva, has driven home his message more powerfully by making it the story of Iqbal, rather than a treatise on the repercussions of terrorism. He has made use of his own experiences and expertise in the Armed Forces to weave an interesting and readable novel. ■

