

Business Standard

A taut, fast-paced, prescient thriller

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After I had finished the last page of *Lashkar*, I couldn't wait to get my hands on Mukul Deva's follow-up to the book. *Lashkar* had gripped me with its fast pace, human drama, well-developed characters, and most of all, the thought-provoking insights into the human aspects of the Kashmir conflict. And when *Salim Must Die* was released, I had to get it right away. I looked forward to another page turner, and had prepared myself for a thrilling ride.

SMD is fast, and furious. The action is non-stop and full of suspense. The story takes off from where *Lashkar* ended — Iqbal, the earnest boy, with a keen mind for mechanics, turned into a cold-blooded and efficient killer during the course of the *jihadi* training imparted on him, is on his way back across the LoC and is captured by the Indian armed forces. Iqbal has changed from fighting as a brainwashed convert to a single-minded young man with a sole, clear mission in life. From there, the story takes off, and just doesn't stop, right till the end.

While *Lashkar* focused on a very specific and local aspect of the terror sweeping across the world, *SMD* takes this to a global level. No longer is the action confined to India, Pakistan and the rudimentary but extremely effective *jihadi* training camps. The action — for that's what this book is all about — is more sophisticated, fast-paced, and terrifyingly real. Deva brings together diverse characters, and weaves them into a storyline that is at times scary, sometimes astonishing, on the whole well-stitched-together, and one that leaves you breathless. There is very little in the story that seems far-fetched, such is the quality of the research. At the same time, you shudder to think that most of it is believable.

At the centre of this storyline is the supposedly deceased Brig Murad Salim, the most ruthless and brilliant architect of the global terrorist nexus. His manufactured death at the end of *Lashkar* gives him the opportunity to plot his most ambitious and deadly strike into the hearts of all those who fight against his version of the truth. Like Iqbal, Salim too is single-minded in his mission, and will stop at nothing, not even treason, to achieve it.

Those trying to stop this deadly strike, without knowing who or what they are up against, are led by Col Ambu and the rest of his Force 22 colleagues. While we were introduced to Force 22 in *Lashkar*, we never really got to know the persona of Col Ambu. In *SMD*, the readers are introduced to the person, not just the leader of Force 22. In a subplot that could have been developed further (and one hopes that it may well be in the further sequels), Ambu's personal history and what drives him is revealed to us, and this helps us develop a bond with the man who has dedicated his life to the service of his country.

As the action moved across cities, countries and continents, I found myself enthralled, yet kept feeling that one ingredient was missing, something that was found in abundant quantities in *Lashkar*. I couldn't put my finger on it for a large part of the book, till I came across Iqbal's character again. Then it hit me — it was Iqbal. The human element, struggles and vulnerabilities of this young man, and his ultimate transformation, had made *Lashkar* feel very real. Though Deva does develop his characters in *SMD*, the speed at which the action moves, doesn't leave enough time for him to explore this aspect to its fullest. All in all, *SMD* is a worthy sequel to *Lashkar*. Deva has lived up to the expectations one would have from India's literary storm trooper.

Despite several obvious and very avoidable editorial glitches that mar the otherwise slick, world-class look and feel of the book, the manner in which the action moves relentlessly and seamlessly across a dozen cities in as many time zones is gripping and taut. At every stage one wonders, even hopes, that the terror spectaculars unleashed by Salim's *Lashkar* across the globe will fail. At the same time, one is left wondering as to what will happen should such horrific attacks actually happen. This thought is even more ominous when one reads in today's newspapers that terrorist organisations are actively in search of such terrifying weapons. One cannot also help but wonder how Deva has been able to write about events like the attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team, the formation of the National Intelligence Command/Agency, both of which have happened just recently, though he has obviously written about them some months ago. Makes one wonder — who is Mukul Deva? A modern day Dr Doom or simply, a profiler of the times, who is able to predict events simply by following history and then taking it forward to its logical conclusion.

Overall, a thoroughly entertaining and extremely well-researched book, *SMD* leaves you waiting for the next one as soon as you put it down. And as I finished it, I could imagine *SMD* as a movie I would love to go and watch.

SALIM MUST DIE

Mukul Deva

HarperCollins India

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