

## WhirledView

### Asia, South

Wednesday, 22 June 2011

## The Worm Must Turn

### A Review Article by Patricia Lee Sharpe

Whenever I'm trying to learn about a new country, I sample the classic literature, the popular literature, the mythology and the folklore. When I was in India last winter, I stumbled across a series of best sellers, the last of which was recently published. I refer to the very timely series of "military thrillers" by Mukul Deva. Although I am no stranger to India, it was a very interesting find.

There's no point in reviewing Mukul Deva's terrorism tetology as literature. His 1500 page opus, masquerading as fiction (well, the names are changed), offers a collection of cardboard characters who manage, just barely, to animate a tract whose purpose is to persuade the Indian government to fight the fight against Pakistan-inspired terrorism on Pakistani territory. Massively. And NOW. Those familiar with Tom Clancy's output will recognize the genre, its thriller-style time-killing attractions and its blood kinship to naked propaganda. The unmitigated antipathy to Pakistan is not surprising; the frequently-iterated hostility toward the U.S., and not only as an ally of the hated neighbor, is perhaps less to be expected. Were I still an active foreign service officer, I'd have looked at this very closely. Here I'll glance at it.

If these books aren't potboilers, they were produced at potboiler speed. *Lashkar* came out in 1008; *Salim Must Die* appeared in 2009. Next came *Blowback* in 2010. With *Tanzeem*, this year, Deva (if that's his real name) informs us "that the salient aspects of terrorism and how it affects our lives today have been adequately dealt with in this series...." He also claims that the characters in his book "have come alive in my mind" so vividly that "a part of me is loath to put them to rest." And does he put them to rest!!! He kills them off, not only the big bad terrorists, but the good guys as well, most especially Iqbal, the heroic but monomaniacal protagonist, and Tanaz, his equally courageous and beautiful young wife. This ploy can be regarded in two ways. Either it's tremendously courageous to bump off the only characters that elicit a modicum of reader interest—or Deva, consciously or not, wants to make it impossible to write a fifth installment. Still, he leaves the door open a crack, concluding with a heart-tugging glimpse of an adorable (naturally) young son being raised by the colonel cum brigadier of the Force 22 US-Navy Seal-like Army unit to which his dead parents belonged. "Yes, my son! One day I will tell you about the man named Iqbal...." Can't you see it? A new series: son of Iqbal.

So who is Iqbal? He's the wet dream of India's counterterrorists and of every American military commander in Afghanistan, too: the terrorist who turns on his masters.

Here's the story. A small town Indian Muslim who's lonely in his big city school, where the boys from more sophisticated backgrounds insultingly ignore him, is recruited by a militant imam, sent to Pakistan to learn the terrorism trade, then

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assigned to a massively complex mission within India. Here, as elsewhere sometimes, Deva's intricate plotting defeats itself; the details get very very boring. Suffice it to say, the plot is uncovered, the damage is limited, and (naturally) Iqbal escapes. Soon, however, he has to rethink his loyalties. His mother and sister are killed by a suicide bomb set off in a market. Renouncing religious extremism, Iqbal becomes instead an Indian killing machine. When, two volumes later, Islamists torture his wife to death, his hatred increases exponentially. The plot of the final volume has two components. Question one is whether Iqbal will succeed in bumping off the Waziristan-based Ameer-ul-Momineen. No suspense here, except how it's done, which I won't reveal. However, whether Iqbal will survive the deed remains uncertain until the last few pages of the saga, when he gets blown to bits. Reading this, I felt no grief, which tells you something about Deva's ability to create moving characters.

Could anyone read the *Lashkar* tetralogy and not call it "hawkish"? I doubt it. But Mukul Deva doesn't seem to like the term. "I have simply tried to profile the times we (sadly) live in," he writes. "However, we all have our biases and some are bound to emerge...."

Here's a somewhat abridged passage from conversations between Indian military men and politicians. Their gist, it seems to me, is clear: no more dovishness. The worm must turn.

"How long will we keep defending ourselves. What will we defend? How many trains, how many buses, how many markets, how many malls? How many temples and mosques? How long and in how many places will we remain on guard? How long should this state of fear be allowed to rule our lives?"

"The time has come for us to take the battle to the enemy. To go in and hit them before they know what's happening."

"Everyone knows that the Pakistani ISI is using these jihadis to inflict a proxy war on us. It is stupid for us to believe that Pakistan is anything but a failed state."

"Pakistan has to be made to understand that attacking India will always be an expensive proposition for them and every attack will result in a direct and proportionate counter-attack."

In short, says the Colonel, the arch terrorist "Salim must die."

"This is not America, Colonel.... The Indian government does not sanction murder."

"With due apology, sir, this is not murder. I am talking about the need and the right to defend ourselves."

"That, Colonel, is exactly what the Americans say when they bomb innocent villagers in their hunt for Al Qaida terrorists. That is what they say when they trample upon human rights and individual freedom in the name of Homeland Security. That is the excuse they give for holding prisoners in covert jails without due process, and for the host of unspeakable things that they have done and continue to do to nameless faceless people who have little to do with their so called war on terror."

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And so we segue into Mukul Deva's view of the United States, which is to say his view of Indian officialdom's view of America, which is probably his. It's not pretty. Take a look at a few more passages from *Lashkar* and *Tanzeem* :

“So devastating was the drain on Soviet economic and military might that it eventually brought the superpower to its knees, leaving the world at the fickle mercy and uncertain wisdom of America.”

“America's targeting Middle Eastern countries like Iraq militarily “was totally in the interests of the Anglo-American oil conglomerates, the Wall Street financial establishment and the huge military-industrial complex that has tremendous influence over the White House.’ ”

“The U.S. has contingency plans to use nuclear weapons on India because it is one of the three countries having “the military, economic and geo-strategic potential to counter its [American] influence.”

“The *they-have-weapons-of-mass-destruction* excuse for attacking other countries is absurd “when you consider that the Americans themselves have the largest collection of WMDs in the world.”

“Almost every nation was aware that the Pakistani General's claim that he had curbed all terrorist activity in his country was a blatant lie...yet they refused to acknowledge it. The Americans even went about applauding the General and praising him for his help in hunting down the Al-Qaida.”

“ ‘Those damn Americans with all their talk of human rights and their moral high ground are absolutely full of shit. They have historically always supported dictators, druglords and terrorists all over the world....We all know who gave birth to the terror factories in Afghanistan,...who supplied chemical weapons to the Middle-East....’ ”

“ ‘...General Sahib....You think the Americans do not know what you are doing with the money they give you? They need an enemy to fight, they need to give you the money as badly as you want it. How else would their weapons factories continued to make profits if they were not selling those damn things to Pakistan. The Harpoon missile and F-16 factories have you guys to thank.’ ”

Finally, here's an interesting passage that had to have been written some three years before Osama bin Laden was found in a compound in the Pakistani garrison city of Abbottabad. “The Americans had no clue that the man they were spending millions of dollars trying to find was safe and sound, right under their very noses.”

If Mukul Deva's military men and politicians accurately represent establishment opinion in India, it sounds to me as if there's plenty of room for public diplomacy in India. On the other hand, maybe some policy-changing in Washington needs to come first.

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