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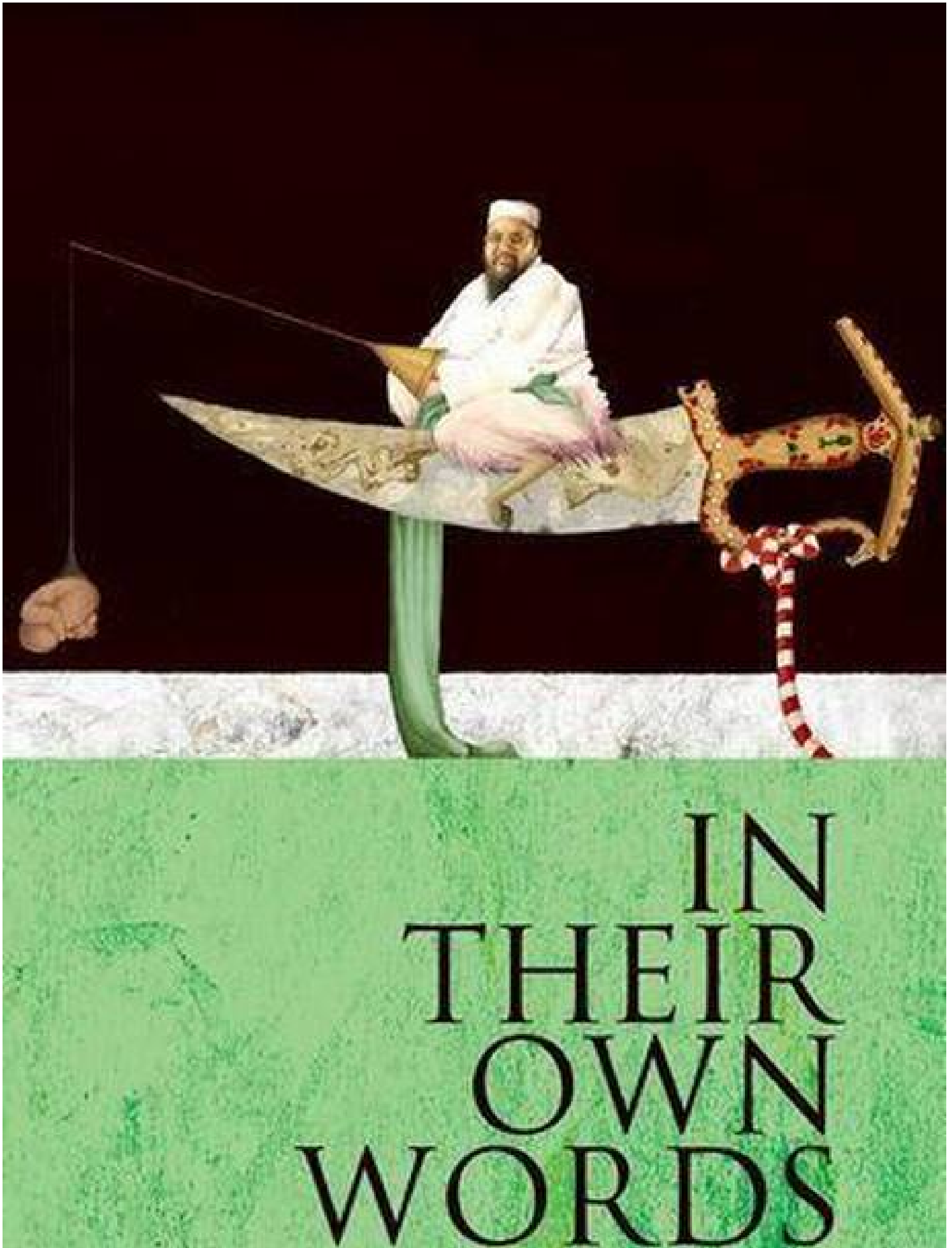
In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba review: The making of a jihadist group

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To expand its geopolitical interests, Pakistan's most dangerous outfit is the Lashkar, points out a writer



Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba

C. Christine Fair

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The world woke up to the dangers posed by the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT) only after the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai that killed more than 160 people, including foreigners. Though the group was recognised as a foreign terrorist organisation by the U.S. government in December 2001, the U.S. saw it largely as India's problem. The Mumbai attacks changed that approach. There was a pile-up of literature on LeT, and the U.S. started putting more pressure on Pakistan to take action against the group. But despite the efforts, the LeT's operations are largely unaffected. C. Christine Fair explains in her book, *In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba*, why and how the group survived the global anti-terror campaign.

Pakistan's designs

Fair, an associate professor at Georgetown University, U.S., tells the story of the LeT by analysing the group's own literature. She places the rise of the jihadist group in the larger context of Pakistan's power complex and its 'revisionist' character. Pakistan was not satisfied with the outcome of partition. So it has always wanted to change the geography of the subcontinent. Since it lacked the conventional might to do so – all its attempts to change the status quo through conventional conflicts were thwarted by India – it turned to sub-conventional methods. Over the years, Pakistan has used several proxies to expand its geopolitical interests abroad. Of them, the LeT is 'the most lethal and most loyal' outfit of the Pakistani establishment, argues Fair.

Why so? There's an ideological convergence between the LeT and the Pakistani establishment. The Pakistani army doesn't want the proxies to challenge its interests within the country. For the LeT, 'jihad' is the battles it fights beyond Pakistan's borders (say, India and Afghanistan). Even when other proxy groups turned against the Pakistani military in the wake of its joining hands with the U.S.'s war on terror in the early 2000s, the LeT has never launched attacks within Pakistan. Inside the country, the LeT stayed focussed on its social and philanthropic activities, while in India and Afghanistan, it carried out subverting activities. This suits the establishment, which in return offered protection to the LeT.

Hydra-headed outfit



Fair gives a detailed account of the LeT's ideological roots, organisational structure and its evolution as a hydra-headed social and militant outfit. When the group came under international pressure, it would rename itself as a social organisation and emerge unaffected by state actions. Fair says there were occasions where intelligence warned the group about impending government actions so that the LeT or its parent organisation Jamaat-ud-Dawa could take counter-measures in advance. JuD or LeT now have countless family organisations, a wide network of activists, large fund-raising capabilities and thousands of recruitment centres. It remains a threat, primarily to India.

So what can be done? Fair lays down three options – maintain the status quo, decapitate the leadership, or escalate tensions. The problem is that Pakistan's nuclear capability offers the country some protection for its proxy activities. Both India and other affected countries should bear that in mind while formulating policies.

In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba; C. Christine Fair, Oxford University Press, ₹950.

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