

Capture in Detail

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Anatomy of an Abduction:

How the Indian Hostages In Iraq Were Freed

V. Sudarshan,

Penguin, Rs 295

The tragic, US-led war in Iraq that was launched on March 18, 2003, will soon be five years old and with no resolution in sight, the mayhem continues. It is a cynical reflection of our times that the unending turbulence and bloodshed in what was once the cradle of the Mesopotamian civilisation have been more or less erased from the public consciousness — unless there is even greater violence and killing than what is accepted as the norm.

India was also an affected party in the early stages of the Iraq war and this was a major domestic and foreign policy crisis for the newly sworn-in, Congress-led UPA government. In mid-2004, three Indian truck drivers working for KGL (Kuwait Gulf Link Transport Company) and four other drivers — three Kenyans and one Egyptian — were abducted while transporting goods from Kuwait City to Fallujah. The incident occurred on July 21, 2004, and soon snowballed into a breathless breaking story on Indian television channels. The Kandahar crisis of December 1999 had set a precedent for intrusive and incessant television coverage of such incidents and the abduction crisis in India, with the distraught families in India giving vent to their anguish was tailor-made for the medium.

The book under review is a detailed account of this abduction and the manner in which the mandarins of the Indian Foreign Ministry rose to the occasion. In 14 action-packed chapters, the author recreates the sequence of events from the moment Brij Bhushan Tyagi, the Indian ambassador to Iraq, received information about the abduction — while on leave in Delhi — till 4 p.m. on September 1, when the drama ended on a happy note with the released drivers being escorted out of Baghdad.

The book is rich in detail and offers many valuable insights into the working of Indian diplomacy — from the minister and senior officials right down to the security guard and cook in Baghdad. Clearly, Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahmed emerges as the central figure and the author is fulsome in his praise. In Sudarshan's account, Ahmed is the man in charge, the chairman of the Crisis Management Group who for 40 days has his hand on the tiller — keeping the families of the drivers assured, the media at bay and working the phones with Baghdad and well-wishers in the Gulf. Zikrur Rahman, an Arabic interpreter in the Foreign Ministry, and his senior colleagues are the men on the spot, in Baghdad, negotiating with elusive interlocutors. Sudarshan provides painstaking detail on a day-to-day basis, highlighting the intrigue, the duplicity, the bruised Iraqi sensibility and more.

This density of reportage and reconstruction (we even have a conversation between Ahmed and the PM in verbatim) limits the scope of the narrative, which is a pity. This book is the first attempt that I can recall of a major national crisis being fleshed out in valuable detail, and the otherwise opaque working of the internal structures of the government is illuminated. But there is no sense of issues being placed in a larger context.