

Theological thriller

A well-researched work of fiction that explores Jesus' life in Kerala and Kashmir.

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The Rozabal Line, Ashwin Sanghi, Westland Books, Rs. 250.

The legend that Jesus did not die on the cross but travelled to India and died in Kashmir was buried as myth decades ago by theologians. But as fiction it acquires new life, new possibilities, taps into the rich vein of religious conspiracy thrillers. And after **The Da Vinci Code** this old legend feels less like myth and more like hidden history. Ashwin Sanghi's **The Rozabal Line**, set in Kerala and Kashmir, is closely researched. The crisp, efficient mechanics of its thriller-plot (international conspiracy with a large cast of intriguing characters) did not interest me as much as the tantalising scholarship it unfolds: Christianity's debt to Buddhism and the life of Jesus in Kerala.

The Da Vinci Code kicked up a storm of controversy among conservative Christians, and while the dust has settled on that, I have to wonder now how conservative Christians in India are going to view the book. They have always scoffed with amusement at this "Jesus in India" theory, not considering it worthwhile to even argue against it. But now **The Rozabal Line** brings the controversy right into their turf. Their friends, neighbours, colleagues, pastors, parishioner, and possibly their children are going to be reading it — do they (they being Christian fundamentalists, not liberals) have a scholarly rebuttal or are they going to wish it away by dismissing it?

The Rozabal tomb in Srinagar, Kashmir, is said to be the final resting place of Yuz Asaf — or Jesus. For those coming late to this legend, **The Rozabal Line** will amply fill you on it — how Jesus could have travelled to India between 12 and 30, those missing years, and studied Buddhism, how Jesus possibly returned to In-



dia later, and spent some years in Kerala and so when Thomas his apostle arrived on its shores, he was greeted by the Master himself! But the book goes further to consider the possibility that Jesus and Mary Magdalene saw India as their true spiritual home because of its deep roots in the sacred feminine. A provocative, clever and radiant line of theology Sanghi suggests is that the cult of Mary Magdalene has its true inspiration in the trinity of the Indian sacred feminine — thereby outthinking and out-conspiring Dan Brown.

Loose ends

Several questions remain, some of them being: Why did Thomas continue to preach Christ crucified and risen to those first Brahmin converts on the Malabar coast when his master himself was alive and living in Kerala? If Jesus didn't really travel to India, why does the legend of Yuz Asaf resemble him so closely? If Jesus and the hermetic Essene sect (that John the Baptist also belonged to) were not influenced by Buddhism, what are we to make of what is now known as "The Jesus Scrolls" at the Hemis Monastery in Tibet — scrolls that tell of an Essene scholar who studied at the monastery?

Where — and who — are Jesus' Indian descendants now?

The author makes it clear (unlike Brown who tried to pass it off as secret history) that the work is fiction. Two factors drove Sanghi to write it, and in a note to readers, he says: "I am saddened to see that the tomb remains in a state of disrepair with scant international attention. **The Rozabal Line** is my personal tribute to this tomb and to the person who lies buried within it. If I do earn anything from this book, I hope that I will be able to contribute to the cause of preserving a global treasure — Roza-bal." And the second and more important factor: "...to make ordinary people understand that the world's religions are more interconnected than we have ever imagined and that this understanding is absolutely vital in today's age of religious conflict."

Ambitious work

A blurb from the book jacket sums up how ambitious its scope is: "From Jesus to Muhammad; from the Crusades to 9/11; from the Vatican to the White House; from Skull & Bones to the Illuminati; from Buddhist meditation to past-life regression; from the Virgin birth to nuclear destruction; and from Mary Magdalene to Osama-bin-Laden; **The Rozabal Line** has it all, and more." The book zips through several centuries back and forth, cramming in enough for several thrillers. Does it work? That depends really on how you like your thriller — complex and dense or functional and racy. I didn't mind that **Rozabal** was racy, but traversing so much ground does not add to its excitement or suspense. What it does offer instead are quick, fascinating religious — or pseudo religious — history lessons. It's nice to have an Indian religious conspiracy thriller. As a conspiracy buff, I enjoy the genre, and wish for more to flood our publishing houses.