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### Facts of fiction

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Writer Ashwin Sanghi

*The Hindu*

*Ashwin Sanghi talks about his latest book, Chanakya's Chant, and his fascination for the historical thriller*

After the fast-paced “The Rozabal Line” (2007) Ashwin Sanghi's next book “Chanakya's Chant” (Westland, Rs. 195) is another historical thriller switching breathlessly between 340 B.C. and the present. The book tells the story of Chanakya and his role in the making of Chandragupta the ruler of the Mauryan Empire. The book also follows the story of Gangasagar Mishra, a teacher who becomes a kingmaker in Independent India.

“I think Chanakya is a phenomenally interesting character,” Ashwin says settling down for a quick chat. In town to launch the book at Reliance Time Out, Mantri Mall, the writer says: “It is a pity Chanakya was called Machiavellian, when Machiavelli, who lived between 1469 and 1527, actually borrowed from Chanakya.”

After “Rozabal,” Ashwin decided to do something different. “Rozabal’ was theological while ‘Chanakya’ is political. Unlike ‘Rozabal,’ which was about research, the aim of ‘Chanakya’ is plot, plot, plot, which carries the character. The common DNA of course is history.”

History always fascinated Ashwin who says: “History is always an integral part of me. I enjoyed reading Amar Chitra Katha and Asterix comics.”

Ashwin says “Chanakya” was easier to write than “Rozabal” because the latter “dealt with matters of faith. I was roasted alive by believers. The worst that can happen to me over ‘Chanakya’ is I would get roasted by critics!”

Negativity doesn't pull Ashwin down. “What I would not like is to be ignored. I write from the heart. I don't write for me. I write for my readers.”

Admitting that labels are not for him, Ashwin says: “My greatest fear is being slotted. This way I have the freedom to write what I want.”

### Bread 'n' butter

Speaking of researching the novel, Ashwin says: “More than 70 per cent of my research involved reading the “Arthashastra”, “Nitishastra” and “Mudrarakshasa”. The skeleton of my novel is always built from solid research. I look at recorded facts as historical goal posts. These are the slices of bread for a writer of historical fiction. It is the writer's job to make the filling and the sandwich!”

The Mumbai-based writer continues, “Vishakhadatta wrote the historical play ‘Mudrarakshasa’ on Chanakya. The series on Doordarshan is based on it. The ‘Arthashastra’ is a treatise on governance. It is dry but fascinating nevertheless. There is no moral judgement and even has details on recipes and how to manage gambling!”

The 42-year-old says he started thinking about the book “in 2009. After six months of research and television watching, I took six months to write the book.”

When I last spoke to Ashwin, he spoke of finalising the script for “Rozabal.” “It is a complicated story spanning different time frames and countries. I have a friend in the United States who is fascinated by the book and is looking to developing the screenplay.”

The entrepreneur by day says his approach to writing uses business tools. “I am a businessman at the end of the day. I have grown up with Excel sheets. I start out writing my novel with spread sheets and the milestones in each chapter highlighted.”

Ask him what next, and unlike most people who would prefer a break to recoup Ashwin says: “I find it difficult to take a break! I have three stories in mind and need to freeze on one. There are three things I look for in a story — it has to be a thriller, I cannot see myself writing literary fiction or a saga! There has to be a historical connection, otherwise the adrenalin will not flow. And I will try to bridge the gap between ‘Rozabal’ and ‘Chanakya’.”

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