

POLITICAL FICTION

He insists that the tale of blood, wealth and power was eventually for the good of the people. In a conversation with Ashwin Sanghi, the glamorous and unscrupulous world of politics, as seen in *Chanakya's Chant*, is revealed.

His basement haunt is a shrine for book lovers, packed with leather bound copies of classics and sizeable books on religion, mythology, philosophy and what not. Ashwin Sanghi's affluent background and Yale education certainly make him well-spoken and articulate, but it is his understanding of the myriad subjects of religion, politics and history that make him a passionate storyteller as well.

His first book was written under the pseudonym of Shawn Haigins. *The Rozabal Line* was born after Ashwin read 32 books on the subject of Jesus in India. "My wife

said, 'Why don't you write a book on this subject?' I knew that the only way to get someone to read this is to popularise it. I didn't want it to become just another book on a dusty bookshelf." *The Rozabal Line* had to be published by him, but by the end of 2008, Westland wanted to publish his book and asked him to do so under his own name. "I signed a contract with Westland and my editor said the pseudonym has to go. He said, 'If I arrange a meeting with Shawn Haigins and they see a pot-bellied Marwari man, it just wouldn't work'."

But it's his second book, *Chanakya's*

Chant, that is winning accolades in the publishing world and the blogosphere. The story of a small, gangly man with a pock-marked face and crooked teeth who ruled the world through Chandragupta Maurya is a thrilling tale. Adding to this, Ashwin uses the parallel story of Pandit Gangasagar Mishra in modern times to represent Chanakya, but this time to bring into power a woman and make her the Prime Minister. "Even though I admired Chanakya when I read the *Arthashastra*, one of the things that came through was the fact that he was a complete male

chauvinist. In the modern day story, I thought this trait should be used only to make a woman as powerful as Chanakya made Chandragupta."

Shuttling between the two plots, one that is set 2300 years ago and one that takes place in the current times, the book keeps your mind alert. There are a lot of interesting commonalities between the two. Master strategists both, but with total disregard for right and wrong in lieu of achieving success and making the larger picture better. In the book, Chanakya understands the principles of *Dana, Danda* and *Bheda*—bribery, punishment and divide-and-rule, respectively. Ashwin's rendition of the *Arthashastra* raises the hair at the back of your neck as you see these principles being used even today. But Ashwin explains, "In Chanakya's time, these little wrongs were done for the sake of governance, but today these wrongs are done and there is still a lack of governance. If you read the *Arthashastra*, you will see that even the breadth of the roads were prescribed keeping in mind the width of the chariots that could pass on a two-way street, even leaving enough space for a third chariot in case of an emergency." In Ashwin's view Chanakya understood politics so well that he knew his face did not resemble that of a powerful ruler. Hence, he chose Chandragupta to run the empire while he remained the mastermind behind it all.

He doesn't think that any one person in today's day and age holds all the qualities of Chanakya, but he does see a reflection of certain virtues in Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Narasimha Rao and, more contextually, Anna Hazare. Ashwin has already sold the rights of his book to UTV and will soon see his book being turned into a movie. In his book, he mentions the Shakti Mantra that the modern day protagonist, Gangasagar, uses to ask the Goddess for strength. When we arrive at his home for the interview, we also see a Sanskrit shloka inscribed outside the front door. He explains, "I have not been a very religious person, but I am a spiritual being."

The Shakti element comes through in his earlier book as well. Ashwin admits that although Jesus was a great human being, Mary was a strong influence and very powerful. As he is a well of uninhibited knowledge and interesting stories, it is difficult to end the interview with Ashwin, but for those who are able to understand the relevance between history and the current times, *Chanakya's Chant* offers some eye-opening explanations. Suspense, scheming and dirty politics have never been so glamorous before.

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