



Calling on the Machiavelli of India

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Think Chanakya and the first thing that would pop into anybody's mind is the work Arthashastra. Considered as the architect of emperor Chandragupta Maurya's rise to power, the simply-dressed hermit looking man is somebody that not many would give a second thought to.

However, author Ashwin Sanghi's fascination for the clear brilliance and fore-thought of the man coupled with his ever-imaginative mind brought forth the book Chanakya's Chant.

Set in two separate era's, the book tells the story of Chanakya's scheming genius that sets Chandragupta on the emperor's throne. Two and a half millennia later, a Brahmin teacher Gangasagar Mishra rises to the same heights of cunning and conniving in the hopes of steering his ward, an intelligent slumchild to the same pedestal that the Maurya king was placed upon. But will he succeed? As the book blurb reads, will Chanakya's chant work again?

"The man was a genius. He was magnificently ahead of his times. While we live in an age where we think twice about accepting things like prostitution, Chanakya had listed out a set of rules and guidelines that would govern the brothels of that age. He had concoctions listed out with specific ingredients and quantities for cocktails to avoid and check adulterated liquor. He planned roads such that there was enough space for one chariot to out-manuever another while not blocking the way for a chariot coming in the opposite direction. We barely see such thoughtfulness in our modern society. The maximum we plan for is five years ahead," exclaimed the author.

The two-novel old author is a business-man by day time and a writer by night. Part of the family business since he was about 16 and having graduated from Yale at the age of 22, took to writing around the year 2005. His first novel Rozabal Line was released under the pseudonym Shawn Haigins. At this point its interesting to note that the Rozabal line fictionally speculated about Jesus surviving the crucifixion and settling down in India. So ask him if there was any particular reason that his pseudonym somehow ended up sounding more Christian than intended and he smilingly replies, "My family had no idea I was writing. Hence the pseudonym. I wanted it to be as far-fetched and remote from who I really was. I guess writing for me, had become a form of rebellion and it was my own time on my own computer with my own story. Plus, Shawn Haigins was the most convenient anagram for my name."

Talking about his book and his inspiration, he says, "Chanakya was the perfect grey character - one never really knew where he stood. The relevance of that grey character and the Arthashastra is so strong in today's world, I couldn't help but write based on it. It was in 2009 actually the idea for the story came about when I saw the politics that was occurring between Karunanidhi and Sonia Gandhi. It took so long to form the government, I was astounded."

"Politics hasn't changed much in all these years and that is where the idea to juxtapose Chanakya's period with that of Gangasagar came from."

Considering that Sanghi was the master of the story, it was interesting to see that when he applied the Chanakya equation to the present, he chose to do it in a similar format of a kingpin egging his pawns on the chessboard and not have the main character both practise and preach to himself.

"I believe Chanakya's greatest flaw was that he was extremely chauvinistic. To counter that, I had Gangasagar choose a girl as his road to success."

Well, whether his final act does justice to the Hindu Machiavelli or not, there's only one way to find out.