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A 'RESTLESS BUSINESSMAN' WHO IS THE AUTHOR OF THREE BEST-SELLERS

What do J.K. Rowling of *Harry Potter* fame, Richard Bach (who wrote the classic *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*), Stephen King, the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series and Margaret Mitchell who penned *Gone with the Wind* have in common with the portly son of PP Mahendra and Manju Sanghi?

If the five world-renowned authors participated in a contest to display the highest number of rejection slips for their first works, they would be beaten hands-down by the young Mr. Ashwin Sanghi who received 47 for his first book, *The Rozabal Line!* (Rowling received 12 slips, Bach 18, King 30, *Chicken* 33 and Mitchell 38.)

The rejection slips made him adopt the pseudonym Shawn Haigins and go for self-publication; but once he was able to discard the anonymity of his *nom de plume* and regained his identity, he got back his rather laconic, self-deprecating wit; as proof of which he described himself as follows – “a pot-bellied Marwari businessman”.

Now a best-selling author whose three works of fiction had clocked combined sales of nearly half a million, Mr. Sanghi was the guest speaker at the last meeting and spoke on “History, myth, fact and fiction”.

Mr. Sanghi, who was introduced by Dolly Thakore, started by saying that he was a very lucky man who appeared to have everything cut out for him in life. He went to the right school and then to the right college; he went to Yale for his MBA; married the right woman; and slipped comfortably into his father's business.

Yet, there was something that made him restless. He was not quite smitten



I hold the world record of 47 rejection slips! The young author, Mr. Ashwin Sanghi, speaks at the last meeting

by the kind of life that lay ahead of him. A few years after his 30th birthday, when he should have been secure in the fact that his future had already been chalked out, he was overcome by a restlessness that made him question himself.

Was this the life that he wanted to lead? Was he not in a rat race? And did he realise that even if he won the rat race, he would still remain a rat?!

The answer came to him in a fortuitous manner. While on a holiday in Goa with his wife, he happened to read a book *Jesus Lived in India* by a German scholar Holger Kirsten which held him spellbound.

He had heard about the Rozabal shrine in Kashmir and knew that there were two bodies in it. One of these belonged to the 14th century and had a north-south burial (an Islamic burial); the second body was under the first one. It probably dated back to 112 AD and was buried in an east-west direction (making it a Jewish burial).

This story fascinated him and he spent the next one year reading everything available on Jesus, his missing years, the Rozabal shrine and other historical markers pertaining to that period

Among the latter was the work of a Russian explorer, Nicolas Notovitch, who came to India in 1887. He had

found a scroll in a monastery in Ladakh which talked about one Isa and said that he had come there at the age of 13 to study under Buddhist masters.

Mr. Sanghi said he was so engrossed with this story that he soon had “50 or 55 books swirling around in my head and I had reached a point of analysis paralysis!” Then his wife suggested the stringing together of all that he had read into some kind of theory.

That was the first time that he thought of converting what he had read into a story. Soon, he decided to write a book, not a non-fiction tome that would end up as yet another dusty book on a dusty bookshelf, but to write it as fiction so that it entered the popular imagination.

“And so I started to write *The Rozabal Line*. I had never written more than 1,000 words but I would rush home every day after work to sit at the computer and start writing. I used to wait for the day to end so that I could start. And I would write till 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. Soon enough I had about 100,000 words done and at that point I thought my work was over...”

“Then I started submitting my manuscript to editors, publishers and literary agents.”

That was when reality hit him hard. He received not one or two but 47 rejection slips. At his wits' end, he re-

arranged the letters of his name on a Scrabble board and came up with the pseudonym Shawn Haigins and self-published his first novel in 2007. It went on sale through the website amazon.com.

As luck would have it, a copy of the book reached Ms Hemu Ramaiah who was setting up the Landmark chain of bookstores. She managed to track him after a source at Random House told her that Shawn Haigins was actually “a pot-bellied Marwari businessman”.

When they met, she wondered why he hadn't published his book in India. He said he had been rejected by all the publishing houses. But she insisted that it was good and required a re-launch.

Soon, the author called Shawn Haigins was killed and from his remains emerged the real author, Ashwin Sanghi, who was told to quickly develop a thick skin because all creative work attracted criticism.

He was extremely anxious when the first review was about to appear in *The Hindu Literary Review*. It was written by Mr. Pradeep Sebastian who lauded the author. He said, “Ashwin Sanghi is being compared to Dan Browne... but we do him the greatest disservice by comparing him to Dan Browne because he is so much more”.

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Manish and Manojj to report activities

Manish Reshamwala, Chairman of the *Bhavishya-Yaan* Committee, and Manojj Patodia of the Committee for Scholarships and Loans, will speak for five minutes each at the meeting of October 9 on the activities conducted by their respective Committees.

These presentations are part of the series initiated in fulfilment of President Nowroze Vazifdar's promise to have all Directors report to members about the activities undertaken by the Committees in their charge.

The above Committees fall under the Avenue of New Generations: Education and the Director in charge is Madhusudan Daga.

Forthcoming meetings

October 2, 2012

Public Holiday. There will be no meeting.

October 9, 2012

“Multiculturalism: The Singapore experience.” A talk by the Consul-General of Singapore, Mr. Chung Ying Lin.

Ashwin Sanghi expects Hollywood producers to bag the movie rights of his new novel

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That was the moment, Mr. Sanghi said, when he felt that he had arrived and that he could finally consider himself to be a writer. True enough, publishers started chasing him, his three books had together netted sales close to half a million and he was getting movie offers for his books. His second book was *Chanakya's Chant* and the third was *The Krishna Key* which was released in August and had gone up to the top of the bestsellers' list in just eight days.

Turning to his areas of interest, Mr. Sanghi said he loved reading about history and myths, subjects that got his adrenalin pumping. It was often said that a myth was a lie that told the truth or that helped uncover a deeper truth. Thus, all his books, the first on Jesus, the second on Chanakya and the third on Krishna, required him to dig deep – beyond the myth – and to figure out something that could be considered historical about that particular subject.

He had noted that people loved fiction that sounded like fact and facts that sounded like fiction. That was perhaps the reason why many television channels reported news in a sensational manner, complete with an appropriate soundtrack to highlight the "sensational news". Just as they presented fact as fiction, there were people who wanted to read fiction that sounded real.

Mr. Sanghi then showed a few simple graphics to describe the manner in which he looked at things and how he gave thought and word to his ideas.

In *The Rozabal Line*, he had mentioned the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost (in a triangle with the Father at the top). But then he was surprised to note the similar-

ity with the Hindu Trinities. While the male Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva was represented by a similar (phallic) triangle, the female Trinity of Laxmi, Saraswati and Kali was an inverted triangle and looked more like a womb.

When the two (male and female triangles) were combined, it yielded a hexagon, with Brahma at the top and followed in a clockwork direction by Saraswati, Shiva, Kali, Vishnu and Laxmi. And eventually, the hexagon resulted in the Star of David! This knocked him down as a writer.

Similarly, the number 786, said to be holy in Islam, was used by people in different settings. For his part, he first wrote it in Hindi and then brought the numerals closer, touching each other in such a way that the image in the mirror revealed the mantra *Aum!*

"This is how my brain works; you can call it my left brain or my right brain. But for me the fact is that 786 connects to *Aum*. It is extremely interesting for me as a fiction writer because that's where I take interest in my stories."

Similarly, Mr. Sanghi said, Abraham was the patriarch of Judaism and lived in a place called Sumer or Sumeria. The word meant Sumatra and was probably derived from Soma, Somrasa or Somvaar.

In another dexterous exercise, the guest speaker first spelled the name Abraham. He then moved the first 'A' to the end – thus getting Brahma. Next, he said, it was known that Abraham was married to a woman called Sara. Interestingly, Brahma's consort was Saraswati – and the first four letters spelt Sara.

This example once again proved his theory that there were many things common in many religions or beliefs if

one went back in history to study them.

"Descartes said, 'I think, therefore I am'. As for me, writing a book is all about enjoying the journey writing it... I am before you today because I have my own version of Descartes, which is, 'I sink, therefore I swam'." (An allegorical allusion to the fact that he nearly sank under 47 rejection slips!)

Mr. Sanghi then answered questions.

He told Ashok Jatia that he was not keen on selling the movie rights to his new novel *The Krishna Key* because he expected to find a market in Hollywood which had already done Greek mythology and Roman history to death. Now the time was ripe for Hindu mythology and for Indian thought and spirituality to hit Hollywood screens.

President-Elect Nirav Shah raised a guffaw when he reminded the guest speaker that as Attendance Chairman he had written many letters to him on Attendance requirements. But now the rules were not as strict, so would he consider returning to the Club?

Mr. Sanghi disarmed Nirav by saying that he used to look forward to his letters. But he added that there were many other factors that had made him leave the Club.

Shailesh Raina asked whether he was contemplating a book comparing the major religions of the world as a unifying factor.

Mr. Sanghi said if one looked at the major thought and belief systems that existed, say, 5,000 years ago, one would find more things in common than one would expect. Bringing those things into the open would probably have a unifying rather than a divisive effect.

But for his next two books he was concentrating on a modern rather than an ancient sub-text. "Probably, five or seven years down the line, when I will

be a little more educated, that will be the time I will write on that... (the commonality of religions)".

PP Sandip Agarwalla wondered whether it was a mere coincidence that the three major religions of the world had their origin in Asia.

At this Mr. Sanghi regretted the "politicisation of history" as taught in the country. He said entire generations had been brought up thinking that there had been an "Aryan invasion" of India and that hordes of them had poured in from the western borders. Further, they were taught that at some point the invading Aryans had brought the Vedas and the Upanishads.

"The funny thing is that we have this great civilization commonly known as the Indus Valley Civilization – but we don't have any literature associated with it. On the other hand, we have this humungous amount of literature in the Vedas and the Upanishads – which doesn't have a corresponding civilization attached to it!"

"I find it incredible that historians for the last 50 to 100 years have completely ignored this. To a certain extent, it has a lot to do with the politicisation of history as it is taught.

"My personal view is, and I am prepared to be corrected... I believe that the Saraswati river was the life-blood of spiritual thought in India. We have been reading in the Rigveda that some of the great kings lived along the banks of the mighty Saraswati. But for the last 40 to 50 years we were fed the notion that the Saraswati is mythical, that it doesn't exist. It is only in the last ten years that satellite images have shown that the dry river bed of the Saraswati does exist and that it flowed from the Himalayas to the Rann of Kutch."

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Enjoying the company of a former member. Mr. Ashwin Sanghi, who used to be a member of the Club, snapped with, from left, Apurva Diwanji, PP Sandip Agarwalla and Sameer Kaji. In the picture at right, Mr. Ashwin's proud father, PP Mahendra Sanghi, is flanked by Vasant Manohar, Notoobhai Brahmhatt, Hon. Secretary Sitaram Shah and Dhananjaya Mehta



