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# The Krishna Key

After 18 months of rigorous research, Ashwin Sanghi's first book *The Rozabel Line* was ready. But it had no takers. Frustration gnawed at him as he went from one publisher to the other, with no positive feedback. Ashwin then decided to self-publish the book under the pseudonym Shawn Haigins and it went on to become a bestseller. His latest book, *The Krishna Key*, has topped the charts once again

Anil Varshney did not know that he had less than twelve minutes left to live. His modest house in the Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan was deathly quiet at this hour except for the humming of the desert cooler. Varshney loved the silence. It allowed him to immerse himself entirely in the strange letterings and symbols that lay before him.

Work was meditation and prayer for India's youngest linguist and symbolist who had shot to instant fame when he succeeded in deciphering several ancient hieroglyphs from the Indus valley civilisation. Fluent in over fifteen languages, Varshney had ten publications to his credit including the most widely used multilingual dictionary of Indian languages. He was to ancient writing systems what Bill Gates was to operating systems.

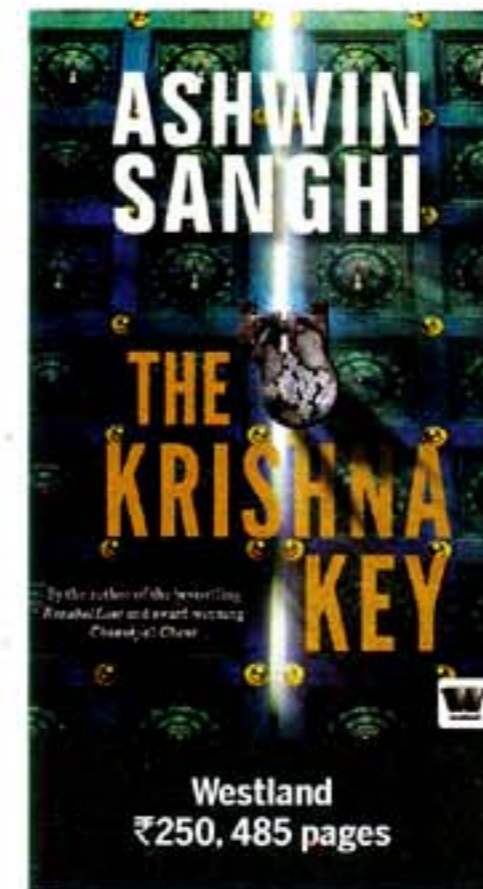
His living space was fashionably disorganised, reflective of the eclectic genius that inhabited it. The bedroom was rarely used because most of Varshney's life was spent at archaeological sites, particularly Kalibangan, the most important Indus Valley site in Rajasthan. His living room had no furniture except for a desk and a patterned-fabric couch that had seen better days. The bare floor was littered with stacks of books, bundles of research papers, as well as cardboard boxes filled with the objects of Varshney's study—seals, pottery fragments, scrolls and parchments.

On the desk before him lay a small rectangular seal, around 20 x 20 mm,

apparently made of conch shell. The seal had a square peg in the back. Strangely, the peg had no hole for inserting a ring into, as was usual with seals of this type. Three ancient animal motifs of a bull, unicorn and goat were engraved in an anticlockwise direction on the face of the seal. And it was this frozen tableau that seemed to be the focus of Varshney's attention.

His desk was strewn with papers on which he had made sketches and scribbles. A notebook computer stood open on a corner of the desk, its screen-saver having been triggered an hour earlier. A brushed-steel desk lamp shone a single, wide beam of fluorescent white light on the seal and the papers surrounding it. Varshney, oblivious to everything else around him, was closely examining the images on the seal with a Carl Zeiss 20X magnifying glass.

Varshney's outward appearance was that of a geek: ill-fitting clothes, uncombed hair, and shirt pockets stuffed with a variety of Rotring Isograph pens. His face was blemished with mild eruptions of acne and his personal hygiene left a lot to be desired. But grooming, bathing and dressing were completely inconsequential in his world. Varshney had spent several years at various Indus Valley sites—including the recent one at Kalibangan—painstakingly creating a database of eight thousand semantic clusters from his lexicon of thirty Indian languages. For the first time since the excavations at Harappa in 1921, Varshney now seemed to have found a way to explain the strange hieroglyphs on over five thousand seals discovered at such locations.



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Varshney was oblivious to his surroundings and did not observe the shaft of light falling on the floor that gradually widened as the main entrance door to his house was quietly opened, the lock having been expertly picked. He did not notice the beam of light disappearing as the door was gently closed. He did not hear the quiet footsteps of light rubber soles on the ceramic-tiled floor, nor did he feel the breath of the stranger on his neck. He only screamed when he saw the intruder's face reflected on his computer screen but by then it was too late. No sound emerged from Varshney's throat because the visitor had tightly clamped a chloroform-soaked handkerchief over his nose and mouth.

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The intruder effortlessly lifted the unconscious Varshney from his chair with his latex-gloved hands and placed him on the floor with his back upright against a wall and his legs stretched out before him. He unzipped the belt pack around his waist and took out a roll of duct tape with which he efficiently gagged his prisoner. He then proceeded to bind his captive's hands behind his back with some more tape. With almost choreographed movements, the assailant delved into his waist bag and took out a little self-inking rubber stamp. He placed the rubber end of the stamp on Varshney's forehead. The resultant image on his victim's forehead was of a small, crimson, wheel enclosed within a circle.

With Varshney still unconscious, the attacker quickly surveyed his victim's inventory of ancient artefacts. He ignored everything except the three-headed animal seal that had been Varshney's object of attention prior to the attack. He took out

a small plastic specimen bag, placed the seal in it and then placed the object back into his waist bag. Where were the other three?

Knowing that the seal was one of a set of four, he searched the living space meticulously for the remaining ones, along with the base plate that he knew was meant to hold the four seals together. Each cardboard box was minutely examined, desk drawers were opened, and even the sofa cushions were ripped open. Coming up empty-handed, the assailant muttered a curse under his breath. 'Damn!'

Resigned to an only partial victory and having surveyed his handiwork, he took out a Swann-Morton scalpel that had been custom-engraved with the initials 'R.M.' from his belt bag, bent down over Varshney's comatose body and with surgical precision thrust the scalpel into the sole of Varshney's left foot, leaving it embedded in the flesh. It gashed through an artery. Blood spurted out while Varshney—still unconscious—began his long and agonising march towards death.

The killer next took out a paintbrush from his belt pack. He gently dipped it into the puddle of blood that had formed around Varshney's left foot and began to write, with the air of a calligrapher, on the wall above Varshney's head:

*Mleccha-nivaha-nidhane kalayasi karavalam  
dhumaketum iva kim api karalam  
kesava dhrita-kalki-sarira jaya jagadisa hare.*

Ravi Mohan Saini surveyed the classroom and smiled at his doctoral student Priya Ratnani seated in the last row, before dimming the lights. The nineteen other students besides Priya were part of the master's programme in ancient Indian history. The students allowed themselves to relax. A presentation usually meant that Saini would not have time to single out any of them to answer tricky questions.

Just a couple of months over forty-five, Ravi Mohan Saini was one of the stars at St Stephen's College in New Delhi. He taught that most interesting course in the university, the History of Mythology. Besides the fact that he had a BA from Oxford and a PhD from the University of Memphis, what made him one of the most popular professors ▶

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was his easy-going nature and dashing good looks. Just a little under six feet tall, Saini had been blessed with godlike physical charms—swarthy features, well-proportioned limbs, toned muscles, an unblemished complexion and wavy hair. He rarely paid any attention to his grooming but his two-day stubble only seemed to enhance his sex appeal to the starry-eyed young women who hogged the front row at his lectures. He was the exact opposite of the geeky Anil Varshney—his closest friend in school. It had never ceased to amaze their teachers that the two of them were such close friends.

The first PowerPoint slide came up. Wordlessly, it simply showed a night sky filled with an assortment of stars. 'Confused?' asked Saini. 'Don't worry. You're not in Astronomy-101. What you see before you is merely a conjunction of Saturn with Aldebaran.'

Before any questions could be asked, he quickly clicked his remote presentation pointer and advanced to the next slide, which was equally mysterious.

'What we have here is another important planetary formation—retrograde Mars before reaching Antares,' continued Saini, amused by the bewildered expressions on his students' faces that were dimly visible from the light reflected off the presentation screen.

Happy to string his students on a little further, he quickly advanced to the third and final slide. 'A lunar eclipse near Pleiades—or the Seven Sisters,' he announced perfunctorily, before switching off the projection system, and brightening the classroom lights. The reprieve had been short lived.

'There are many who believe that the Mahabharata is a myth. Indeed, many of you view the epic as a collection of stories based upon wisdom of the ages but you do not see it as an actual historical event. Well, we're going to change your assumptions today,' announced Saini.

Sitting in the last row, Priya chuckled at the collective surprise this generated. She was completing her doctoral dissertation on the historicity of the Mahabharata under Saini's tutelage and had been through the material beforehand.

Saini continued. 'In the Mahabharata, it is said that Sage Vyasa, its author, met Dhritarashtra, the father of the one hundred Kaurava princes, on the eve of the great war and warned him of the terrible planetary omens that he had seen. One of the omens was a conjunction of Saturn with Aldebaran; another was retrograde Mars before reaching Antares; and yet a third was a lunar eclipse near Pleiades. The very three conjunctions that I just showed you,' said Saini. There was a stunned silence as his students digested this information.

Seeing an arm shoot up, he paused and nodded at the student. 'So what were the slides you showed us?' asked the sceptical young man. 'Simulations of ancient night skies or photographs of modern equivalents?'

Saini smiled. 'Very good question. The slides you saw were computer simulations using a software that recreates the skies as they would have been observed from Kurukshetra—the scene of the epic battle—on any given day of any given year in history. We need to thank Professor Narhari Achar from my alma mater, the University of Memphis, for his path breaking research into this topic. Professor Achar searched for all the years in which there was a conjunction of Saturn with Aldebaran and found one hundred and thirty-seven such conjunctions in history. He then searched for those dates on which Mars was retrograde before reaching Antares. This resulted in just seventeen overlapping dates. Finally, he searched for those dates on which there was a lunar eclipse near Pleiades and was left with just a single date on which all three astronomical events happened simultaneously.'

Saini paused. He loved taking little breaks at the very moments when his students wanted him to proceed further. 'From the exercise conducted by Professor Achar, it is evident that the Mahabharata war must have occurred in 3067 BCE—around five thousand years ago,' said Saini finally.

Everyone in the classroom seemed too surprised to ask any follow-up questions. The only amused face was that of Priya, who continued to smile silently. She knew that the good professor was bang on target. •



Ashwin Sanghi  
AUTHOR

An entrepreneur by profession, Ashwin is passionate about writing historical fiction. His second book *Chanakya's Chant* got the Crossword-Vodafone Popular Choice Award 2010.

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