

A matter of faith

EVENT A reading and discussion on Ashwin Sanghi's *The Rozabal Line*

Did Jesus live in India at any point in his life? Is Rozabal, the tomb of Yuz Asaf in Srinagar, in fact, the final resting place of Jesus Christ?

Ashwin Sanghi doesn't pretend to know the answers to these questions — in fact, he goes out of his way to remind you that he's a) not an academic researcher and b) just a storyteller, a spinner of yarns.

But, with *The Rozabal Line*, what the Mumbai-based businessman and first-time novelist does is ask that really fun question — what if? What if it was and his blood line survives in the region to this day? And, what if that line was somehow entangled with the current-day religious politics and terrorism?

Sanghi was in Chennai recently for a reading and discussion at Landmark on the book published last year by West-



FASCINATED BY RELIGION Ashwin Sanghi PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI

land. The mystery/thriller novel, built very much along the lines of *The Da Vinci Code* (complete with ruthless assassins and references to the Illuminati), seems to have caught the fancy of readers since, making its way onto India Today's bestseller list.

But it didn't exactly have the easiest road to publication. "I sent out the manuscript to 100-odd publishing houses and 99 said no or didn't bother to reply," Sanghi says. "So I decided to self-publish on lulu.com (under the name of Shawn Haigins) and I'm glad I did, because it created a buzz online and soon blog posts started popping up."

That's how Westland found the book, and approached Sanghi about an Indian print edition. "They said: 'What plans do you have for India?' And I said none, because no one wants me!" he laughs ruefully.

Mixed reactions

Three months of editing later, *The Rozabal Line* hit the bookshelves for real, and not surprisingly, it's provoked some pretty varied reactions. "I've been called crazy on the one hand and been told that it's thought-provoking on the other," he comments.

"Mostly, I think the notion that Jesus spent his missing years in India and that he might have seen it as a spiritual home

is incredibly romantic."

That it is. Whatever its faults — and this book, bursting with conspiracy theories and plenty of sensationalist mumbo-jumbo from tantric sex and ancient astrological predictions to instant hypnotic regression to past lives, has its share — *The Rozabal Line* is anchored by the author's obvious fascination with how the world's religions are all linked.

That same fascination shone through during his talk at Landmark, that travelled, like the novel itself, from Mesopotamia to Magadha, Jerusalem to ancient Rome, tracing the way religions have learnt and borrowed from each other down the ages — how Jesus' teachings may have, for instance, been drawn from Buddhism.

At times, the audience actually chuckled in disbelief at some of his more audacious theories (was Mary Magdalene really Mary Magadha-lene?) and at others, was obviously drawn in despite of itself.

"We assume the different faiths are distinctly different, but once you start tracing back the roots of their beliefs, you find their origins are much closer that you might imagine," says Sanghi earnestly. "I'm not saying all of this is fact; I'm just putting the question out there — 'Is it possible?'"

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