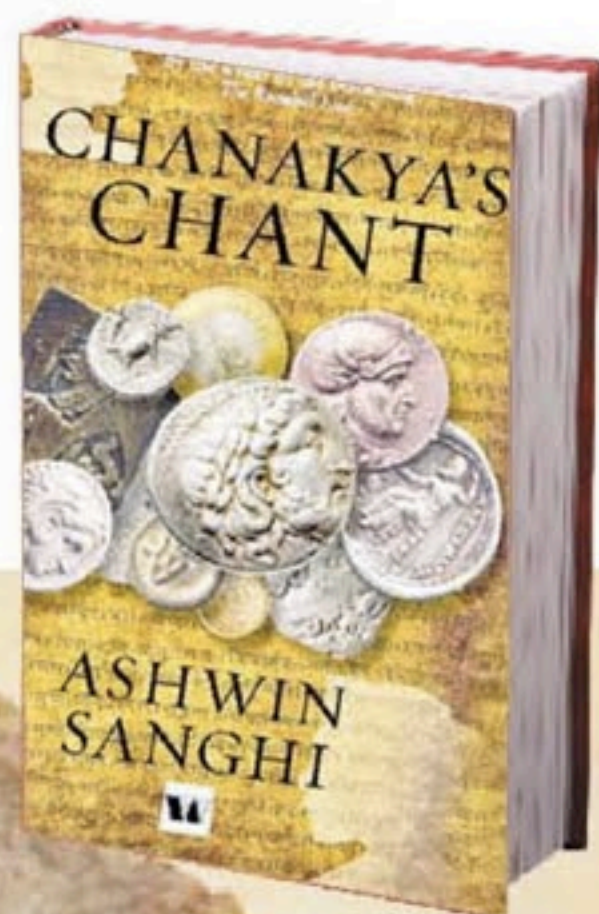


An Indian political saga

Ashwin Sanghi's recent novel *Chanakya's Chant* made **Biswadip Mitra** ask the author about the past and present politics in India, and the future of Indian thrillers



Thousands of years ago, the great Chanakya or Vishnugupta or Kautilya had groomed Chandragupta Maurya in order to rid the Magadha kingdom of the Nanda dynasty. Not surprisingly then, political grooming and conspiracy remain at the core of Ashwin Sanghi's recent historical thriller, *Chanakya's Chant*. The novel moves back-and-forth across the past and present. The rise of Chanakya, and his role as the crafty strategist and mentor takes us about 2300 years back; the 'present day' sees the characters like Gangasagar Mishra, his protégée Chandini and the rest of their associates of the fictional Akhil Bharat Navanirman Samiti, and their foes. There are bloodsheds, legal trials, same-sex relationship, betrayals, murders, assassination attempts and all that which can make this into a page-turner. And an ancient *mantra* that Chanakya chanted acts as a common thread across the pages.

I wonder whether it was his fascination for Chanakya or the current state of India's politics that got Sanghi to write this novel. "A bit of both, actually,"

Sanghi tells me. "I started thinking about this novel in mid-2009, just after the present govern-

ment won a mandate for another five years".

And as he watched the "political drama unfold, more particularly the tug-of-war between the Congress and its alliance partners for cabinet berths," he wondered whether the "politics in India has been always this messy". So he went back to the politics that prevailed thousands of years ago. "The quest for political power was resolved through wars in ancient history, whereas today those wars have simply been substituted by elections. I wanted to examine this connection," he says. "Characters and props change, but the situations that they are confronted with and the human reactions to these situations rarely do," he contends.

Referring to his book he says, "I wanted to write an entertaining book that could keep you hooked from beginning to end". There was "no time for niceties or descriptive prose" in this endeavour. "I have figured out the genetic structure of my novels. I have understood the topics that fascinate me and consequently the topics that get my adrenaline pumping," he says. "I see myself as a literary minimalist," says the author who had earlier penned *The Rozabal Line*.

Born and brought up in a business environment, Sanghi utilised some of his own experiences in the novel.



But the real-life economic and political events of the past five decades, as reported in the newspapers, provided most of the material for the novel. "I find that if one wants to write interesting fiction one needs to look no further than the morning newspaper," Sanghi says. But beyond the newspapers, the author had to study Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and other books on Chanakya, and the English translation of Vishakadatta's historic play *Mudrarakshasha*.

Despite the available resources,

very little actually is known about Chanakya, the person. Plus there are questions as to whether Kautilya, Chanakya and Vishnugupta were the same individual. Considering all of that, Sanghi took a bit of liberty and added his "own spice to make the story more fast-paced and mysterious". According to him, it is better for the reader to "assume that the past is a pure fiction just as the 'present day' story". Quite naturally then, the inevitable question as to on whom the present day characters have been modelled will not lead to any particular political individual. "Elements from the characters of multiple players across the political spectrum have been blended together to form entirely new characters," the author claims, adding, that any resemblance is "purely coincidental".

I ask him whether the Indian thriller writers can compete with the Western writers like Robert Ludlum, John Grisham, Ian Rankin and the like. "Not yet, but we are getting there," says Sanghi. "Today's publishing industry is looking out for spicy whodunits, conspiracy theories, spinechillers, historical mysteries and adventures," he adds. And the resulting new set of Indian thriller writers must be given some time to catch up, Sanghi maintains.

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