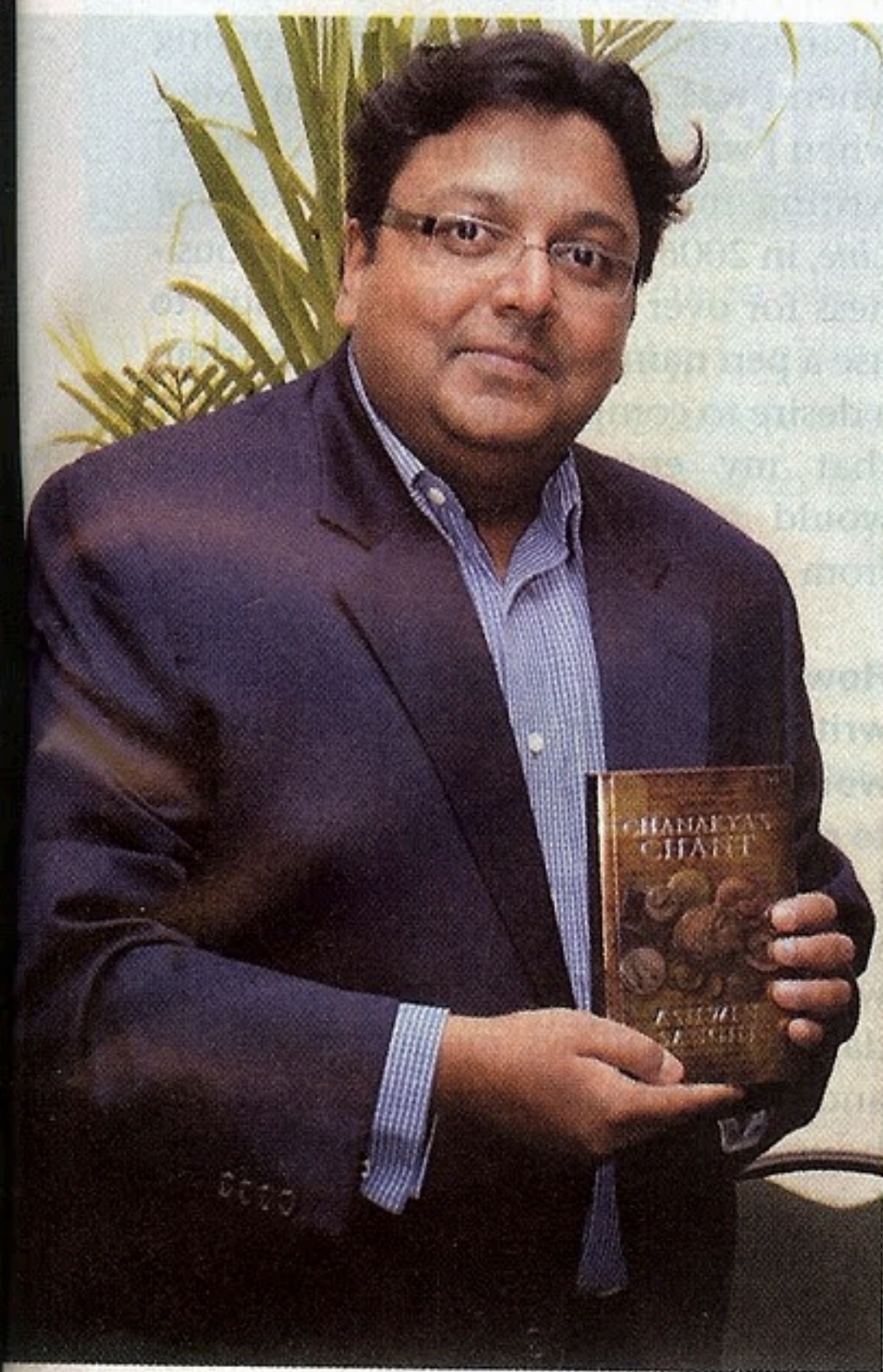


Entrepreneur by day, novelist by morn



It is not common for a business family scion to take up fiction writing and pursue it with such passion. Ashwin Sanghi hails from a business family that has interests in manufacturing, real estate and retail. As a good entrepreneur, he is armed with an MBA from Yale. All through, there was in him a suppressed writer, who finally saw his first book published under a pseudonym. Sanghi has vivid memories of knocking at the doors of many a publisher before he self-published his work in the US. Published by Westland, his book was released in India, to wide acclaim. He tells Suman Tarafdar what led him to write *Chanakya's Chant*, his second book, a political page turner, the research it involved and the challenges of managing work and writing.

What inspires you about Chanakya?

Personally, I'm not inspired by Chanakya. He was far too ruthless to serve as an inspiration for me. However, as a writer of fiction, I find his personality and character extremely interesting. Here's someone who penned reams on government policy, statecraft, strategy and diplomacy almost 1,800 years before Machiavelli! In the manner that a photographer searches for the perfect shot, I find myself searching for complex characters... preferably characters that are multi-hued and thus difficult to characterise as good or bad. Chanakya was efficient yet ruthless, principled yet amoral, intelligent yet devious, magnanimous yet vengeful. In short, the ideal complex character for a novel!

What lessons can modern politicians draw from him?

Too much attention seems to be given to the political machinations of Chanakya, whereas insufficient attention is paid to the fact that his seminal



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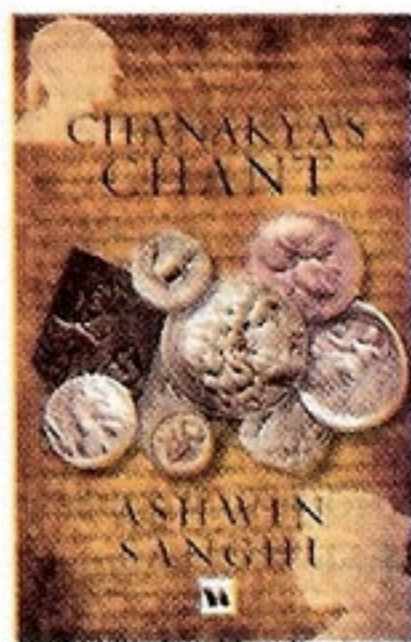
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**CHANAKYA'S CHANT**

Ashwin Sanghi

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Price: ₹195

work, the *Arthashastra*, was mostly about good governance. I was absolutely amazed to find that the *Arthashastra* even specifies how grain should be stored, how a treasury should be constructed, the ideal form of taxation, maintenance of law and order, the preferred width of a carriage road, and virtually every aspect of sensible government policy. It's unfortunate to see that what plagues India today is simply a fundamental lack of governance. I think the lesson for all of us is that we need to pay more attention to Chanakya's lessons in governance rather than his lessons on realpolitik.

Can there ever be a time when politics actually works transparently for the people, or are cynical machinations a must?

In my novel, the key protagonist says that "clean politics is an oxymoron." There is one side of me that wishes to believe that it is indeed possible to have clean politics but the cynical part of me tells me that I'm being naive. It's precisely this unsavoury nature of politics that makes for enjoyable reading! As regards your question about transparency, let's face it, government is a little bit like a theatre production. You sit in the audience and watch the actors play their parts but you never get to see what is happening backstage. You do not get to see the prop boys moving backdrops or the lighting assistants shifting spotlights.

What kind of research was involved in writing this novel? Were there parts you enjoyed writing/creating most?

The research was at two levels because, as you know, there are two parallel stories in this book. The first one traces the rise of Chanakya 2,300 years

ago and ends with him having succeeded in installing Chandragupta Maurya to the throne. The second traces the life of Gangasagar Mishra, a brahmin teacher from Uttar Pradesh who makes it his life's purpose to make a girl from a slum into the country's prime minister. The ancient story required historical reading, including the *Arthashastra* as well as several other books penned on Chanakya.

I also read an English translation of the *Mudrarakshasa*, a historical play in Sanskrit by Vishakhadatta, who lived in the 4th century. The modern-day story simply involved lots of newspaper reading. The drama of politics is enacted before us each day in the front pages... one doesn't need to stray any further! The portions in which I used Chanakya's story to narrate modern-day parallels are the bits that I enjoyed writing the most.

You had mentioned your grandfather as the one who inspired you to read. How did the urge to write come from initially?

When I was studying at the Cathedral & John Connon school in Mumbai, I contributed a few articles to the school newspaper, but they were not very enthusiastically received. When I went to Yale for my Masters, I wrote a column for the school's monthly magazine and several people told me that they enjoyed my casual, yet brisk, style of writing. I returned to India and immersed myself in my family's business affairs and my urge to write manifested itself in terms of a few uneventful business-related articles in scattered journals.

To a certain extent, my business persona seemed to be dictating what I could and couldn't write. I did not realise it at the time but I was killing my passion by writing business-related articles. Writing was my route to creative expression and I needed to write about the things that interested me, not necessarily related to my work. In 2004, I was going through a difficult patch in my life and my wife suggested that I try writing a few pages during a short holiday. At the end of the five-day break, I had written over 10,000 words and there was no looking back.

Why did you choose to write your first

book under a pen name?

As you know, I am not a writer by profession. I was born and brought up in a business environment. I started working when I was 16 and completed my MBA when I was 22. By the time I completed writing my debut novel, *The Rozabal Line*, in 2006, I had already been in business for over 20 years. The decision to use a pen name was nothing more than a desire to compartmentalise my life so that my entrepreneurial dimension would remain distinct and separate from my literary one.

How easy is it to take out time to write from your business and other work? What kind of time are you able to get?

I think that everything becomes easy if you are passionate about it. I usually write early in the mornings, well before dawn. This allows me to have a full and productive day at work. My evening hours are usually reserved for my family. I'm not a social person and this means that I rarely have late nights. I usually write for around three hours in the mornings before I leave for work. I also write whenever I'm on a flight or on travel. I continue to jot down story ideas on my Blackberry even when I'm sitting in my car! I rather reluctantly switch off my writer's thoughts while I'm in the office, so that I can deal with business-related issues, but eagerly switch it on as I'm leaving for the day. ♦

BOOK BUZZ

Reading Orhan Pamuk's books might lead you to think the one-man Turkish book industry in English is a grave soul, given to frequent bouts of melancholia. He seemed to have had a rather testy sojourn at the Jaipur Literature Festival, and more than one commentator mentioned his rather fatigued look. However, by the time of launch of his new book, *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist*, in Delhi, his good humour was restored and he regaled a packed audience, fielding questions not just on his writings but also the role of the reader, the frequent presence of doppelganger in his novels, the political situation and the 'secrets' that everyone knew. No link to a certain Kiran Desai in the front row? ♦