



He's chanting the SUCCESS MANTRA

From self-publishing his first book to seeing his second claim a place on the top of the best-seller lists, author Ashwin Sanghi has emerged as one of Indian publishing's success stories



LIFE & LIVING

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Comparisons are odious — and author Ashwin Sanghi has had enough of being called 'India's Dan Brown'. True, his books qualify as page-turners every bit as Brown's religion-secret society-symbolism thrillers do, but Sanghi believes that's where the similarities end. "In fact, that particular comparison did a great disservice to my first book *The Rozabal Line* because many people picked it up expecting something like Brown's thriller-a-page books. In fact, it is nothing like that and has a very deep philosophical core," says Sanghi.

At the same time, Sanghi, like many writers belonging to a new breed of Indian authors who are not apologetic about writing genre fiction, is unabashed about his love for thrillers and the fact that he's written two particularly successful ones. His first, *The Rozabal Line*, dealt with the premise that Jesus Christ survived the crucifixion and was whisked away to Kashmir,

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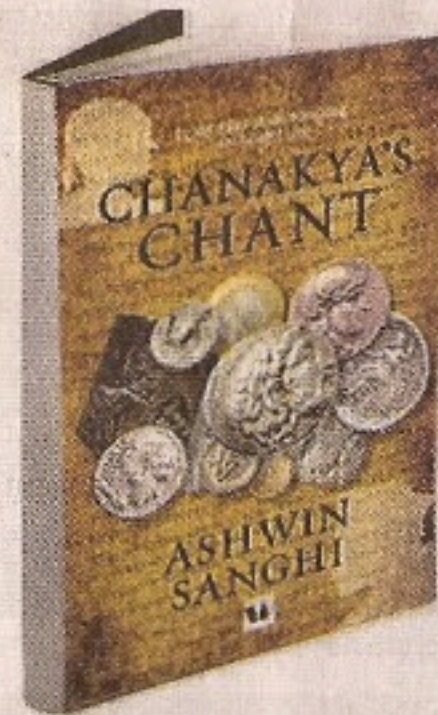
where he spent his last days and was finally laid to rest at the Valley's Rozabal shrine. Sanghi self-published the book in 2007 under the pseudonym Shawn Haigins (an anagram of his own name) after being rejected by several publishers; the book was subsequently picked up by Westland and became one of their top-sellers.

Sanghi offered them his second book *Chanakya's Chant* and was, of course, snapped up. The book is following in its predecessors footsteps by doing great business — it has consistently been among the top five on all best-seller lists.

A history buff, Sanghi says he has always been drawn towards the character of Chanakya. "The *Arthashastra* is a fascinating book. The attention to detail given to every area of governance is as-

tounding. We like to think of Kautilya as a political strategist, but in the *Arthashastra*, he has laid down rules for everything, from how wide chariot wheels should be to how deep under the earth a king's treasury should be located to maintaining hygiene in brothels," informs Sanghi. "Yet, even today we can't be sure if the man we severally know of as Chanakya, Kautilya (the author of the famous *Arthashastra*) and Vishnu Gupta (assumed to be Chanakya's original name) were one and the same."

The narrative of the book shifts between 320 BC, when Chanakya's protégé Chandragupta Maurya ruled over the kingdom of Magadha, and the present time when a wily old politician called Gangasagar Mishra plays king-maker with a girl from humble



origins, whom he vows to set up as the country's prime minister.

Very Jeffery Archer, yes, and Sanghi is the first to acknowledge that his writing sensibility has been strongly influenced by authors such as Archer, Frederick Forsyth, Robert Ludlum and Sidney Sheldon, whom he grew up reading thanks to his mother who had an enviable collection of novels by these authors and who "never questioned the

judgement of letting a teenage boy read them."

"For years, the yardstick by which we judged fiction written by Indian authors remained the same. It was always expected that we would produce literary fiction, award-winning fiction. These expectations are being proven wrong," says Sanghi. According to him, there is a wide reading public reading in English in India today, and it wants well-written, fast-paced books that are more 'rooted' in Sub-Continental history and events and not remote ones such as the Cold War.

Sanghi attributes his success in equal measure to intelligent writing and some savvy marketing. The entrepreneur with a degree from Yale does not undervalue the latter, and has been promoting the book on online forums as well, from Facebook and Twitter to YouTube.

A chant from his current book, which is central to its narrative, has been set to music by young composer Ameya Naik. A video has been creat-

ed to accompany it and been uploaded on YouTube. "With my first book, I was a bit of a babe in the woods. I left it to my publishers, didn't want to be too intrusive. But social media allows an author to take his book out there, and publishers are more than happy to let him to that, because who can talk about a book better than the person who's written it," asks Sanghi.

Religion, history, politics and mythology: these form the DNA of his books, and Sanghi means to weave his narrative strand around these elements in future books too, with one element getting bigger play than the other in each book. He is also obsessed by the blurring of lines between fact and fiction and past and present. "We tend to think Indian politics are messy today, but if you look at history you get a sense that it has always been so. Earlier wars were fought on the battlefield and bloodshed was real; these days, they are fought in Parliament, in courts and on TV channels," he says.

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