

# MARWAR

India

PORTRAIT OF A COMMUNITY

THE  
CULTURE  
ISSUE

Fostering the arts

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CHRONICLERS  
OF CULTURE

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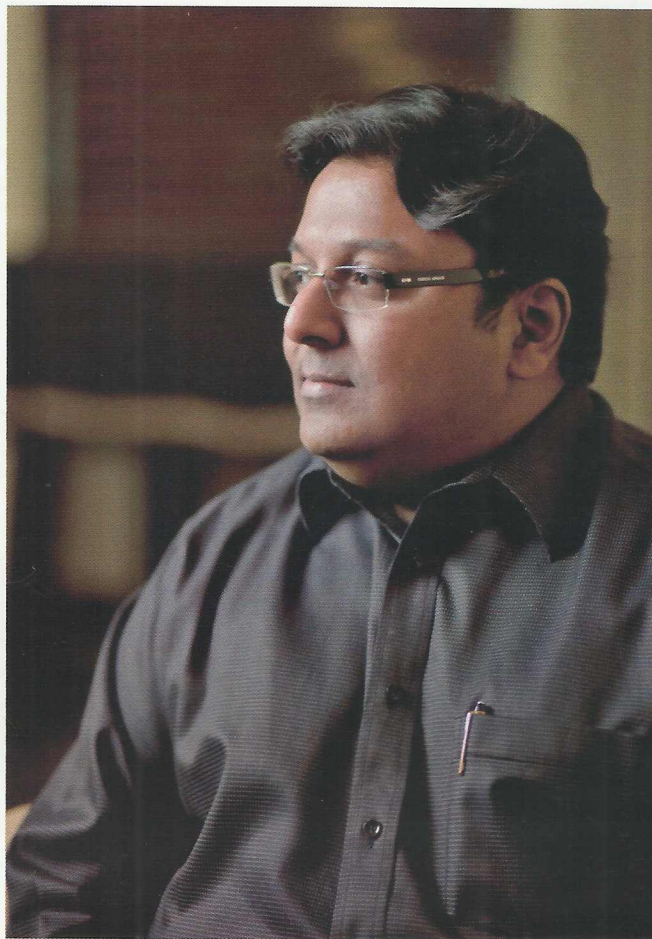
# Chroniclers *of* culture

He is a businessman and she, a journalist. For him writing is a study in method, discipline and meticulous research; for her it is an organic, natural process of telling a story. He writes fast-paced thrillers; she writes narratives that weave across genres. Popular authors Ashwin Sanghi and Namita Devidyal couldn't be more different. What unites them is a common love for the written word and the ability to write engrossing stories that reveal an acute understanding of culture. NIRATI AGARWAL talks to the duo that, in an industry teeming with new writing, is changing the game of Indian publishing.



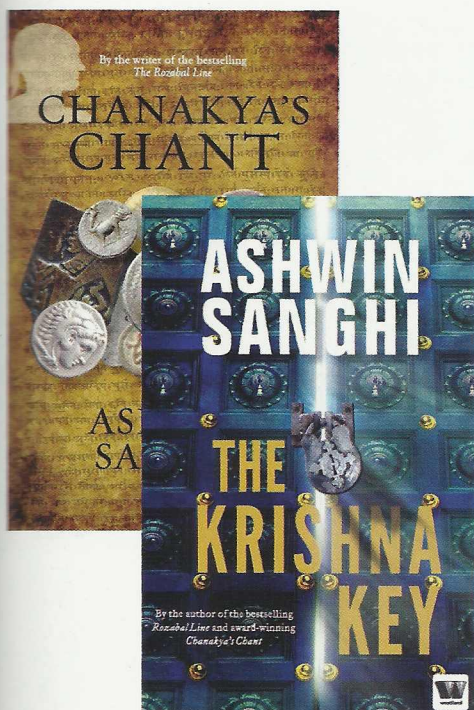


Indian writing in the English language has had a long and arduous past, a fascinating present and a future to truly look forward to. We have gone from writing literary prose—prose that idolised India, yet displayed a sense of disillusionment—for a Western audience to accepting the Indian turn of phrase and idiom and catering to readers in our own country. With sub-genres like chick-lit, historical fiction, young adult literature, magical realism, sci-fi and more, new writing has exploded across our Kindles, iPads and bookshelves. With a newfound appreciation of ‘Hinglish’ and our unique brand of slang, writers, who seem more comfortable with their identity than their predecessors, have produced a smorgasbord of works—some good, some average. In the midst of this sea of change are two writers—Ashwin Sanghi and Namita Devidayal—who, without compromising on the elegance of the sentence, have crafted stories that herald the coming of age of Indian writing in English. As these writers mature over the years, gaining experience—both literally and literary—their works unwittingly represent the cultural climate of the country they inhabit.



Read Ashwin Sanghi's *Chanakya's Chant*, and apart from a parallel storyline about a renowned kingmaker who lived over 2,000 years ago and a political strategist of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we also get a glimpse into the shrewd mind of a Marwari businessman who turns jute waste into profit. Similarly, read Namita Devidayal's *The Music Room*, and apart from the history and rigours of the Jaipur gharana of music and a narrative about her relationship with her teacher, we also get an insider's view of the relationships that develop between women in the second-class compartment of a Bombay local. It is these gems of insight that, when weaved into prose, gleam and shine, beckoning the reader to a world where reality and make-believe merge.

Cultural cues apart, the two writers have distinct subjects as their forte. Ashwin Sanghi's thrillers, with their leanings in mythology, folklore and history, represent the glories of the Indian past and their relevance today, while Namita Devidayal's books—one, a memoir and the second, a dysfunctional family fiction—display a world of classical music and familial life that is peculiar to our subcontinent. Both writers have achieved tremendous success. The first print run of Sanghi's latest book has crossed the one lakh mark, while Devidayal's first book is so universally read (it has been published overseas in Italy and the US) and liked that it gets reprinted every year. Both writers have day jobs; both are punctilious, even obsessed, about research and, as I came to find during the course of my interviews, are actually cousins! The similarities however, end here. Though both writers have been awarded the Vodafone Crossword Popular Book Award in 2010 and 2008 respectively, they have distinct styles of writing, and aim to achieve different goals in the course of their work. One chooses method, the other madness.







## Currency of style

In his carefully allotted three months for plotting his story, Ashwin Sanghi tells me, as he ushers me into his writing studio, he often covers one wall of the room with flowcharts, white boards and posters. Here plot, chapter hooks and twists are meticulously planned, penned and revised. Like the typical Marwari businessman, Sanghi's writing is informed by a penchant for organisation, deadlines and research. For each book, he spends an initial eight months on research alone. While working on his latest book *Krishna Key*, Sanghi had drawn up 108 boxes on his white board with outlines of key events, coinciding with the number of chapters in his book. "Though the book is the length of a standard thriller, it has 108 chapters rather than the usual 30. The chapters are short, and the idea is that the sequence changes very, very quickly," he explains. The boxes contain twists and hooks that he would subsequently weave into the story in

the six months of allotted writing time. His discipline may arouse either censure or approval—he has faced all kinds of criticism and received all manner of praise—but it certainly explains the fast-paced, racy thrillers that he is able to produce.

As I take another look around his writing studio, I notice one wall covered with bookshelves that are stuffed like sardines with thrillers, murder mysteries, non-fiction books and leather-bound and gold-lettered hardbacks. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Zakaria's Translation of the Quran and Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, all vie for space with thousands of other books. Another wall displays shelves chock full of DVDs, mostly gritty crime dramas like *Wire in the Blood*. No wonder, then, that his books reflect the same energy!

If Sanghi's books simulate movie sequences packed with action and intrigue, Namita Devidayal's books invite one to slide into a hammock

and read aloud. Her lyrical prose is a result of a bohemian attitude and a certain belief in her work. "Writing for me is very organic and unstructured, and that's how I live my life. While writing *The Music Room*, I had no idea about the beginning, the middle or the end. I just kept writing," she says. It took her two years to write her first autobiographical novel, in between caring for her baby, moving back from New York to Mumbai and long stretches of not writing at all. *Aftertaste*, her first fictional narrative based on a Marwari family obsessed with money, has a more organised plot; but Devidayal says that she still didn't know what her characters would do when she began writing. This looseness and comfort is evident in her writing, and it is all the better for it, showcasing a rare confidence.

## Beginnings

This confidence also stems from Devidayal's education and work



as a journalist and the ease with which her first book was published. After graduating in journalism from Princeton University and a one-year sabbatical to learn music from her teacher, Dhondutai, in Mumbai, Devidayal joined *The Times of India* as a feature writer in 1992. Today, she is a consulting editor for the newspaper and writes on topics such as literature, arts, culture and finance, and also is a co-curator of The Times of India Literary Carnival. She had learnt classical music even as a young girl, acquiring a rare insight into a rarefied world where few are ever allowed.

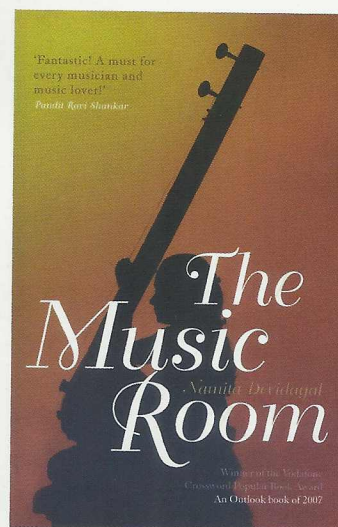
On a friend's suggestion, Devidayal embarked on writing *The Music Room* as an autobiographical account, and much of the book was written parallel to her immediate experiences. After appointing an agent in America, Devidayal showed the novel to a Random House editor overseas, who then recommended the book to Chiki Sarkar, an editor with the Indian wing of the publishing house, and that was that. Both her books are very different, not only in subject, but also style; however, this doesn't deter her. "I am completely fine with not having control over my writing because I trust my

work. There is an integrity, a certain faith, love and belief I have in it," she says.

Faith, in fact, was Sanghi's only ally when he completed his first book, *The Rozabal Line*, in 2006. After visiting the Rozabal tomb in Srinagar and reading volumes on the possibility that this may be the tomb of Jesus Christ in India, Sanghi was persuaded by his wife, Anushika, to finally do what he had been postponing for years: meld fact, fiction and history into an action-packed thriller. Sanghi wrote the book only to face rejection from every publisher he approached. After



Image Courtesy: Kavi Bhansali



Namita Devidayal as a teenager learning raga Lalita-Gauri during one of her music lessons with Dhondutai





**“What excites me isn’t a reinterpretation of mythology, but rather, to take a story, then dig a little deeper and ask, ‘Is there a historical basis to this? *Mirch masala* aside, did the Mahabharata War really happen?’”** —Ashwin Sanghi

one year of misery, he finally decided to self-publish the book through a print-on-demand company called Lulu Press. Then, Sanghi embarked on a gruelling task: Since no newspaper would review a book that was self-published, he set about targeting five bloggers a day who wrote on books and literature. “I would then e-mail them, ask them if they would care to review my book and send them review copies. I also became active on Twitter, Facebook and social media websites. When someone would read my book I’d ask them to go on Amazon.com and post a review there. It didn’t matter if they liked it or didn’t; any publicity was good publicity,” he says. After a few months, the book was finally noticed by Gautam Padmanabhan, CEO, Westland. The rest, as they say is history! The publishing house printed *The Rozabal Line*, which is currently on its ninth print run, and continues to entertain readers. His second book quickly rose to *India Today*’s bestseller list, and won the Popular Book Award. His third book released to great fanfare just last month.

### The motive

Between this flurry of work, Sanghi’s motive for writing remains steadfast, giving him the necessary drive to come back home and write after an eight-hour day; he is the director of the family business, the M K Sanghi Group, which deals in real estate, automobiles, manufacturing and engineering. Once home, he arms himself with a peg of Bhuno Harbor whiskey, takes a puff on his Hoyo de Monterrey cigar, and settles down on his Macintosh computer. Passionate about history (which was also his favourite subject in school), Sanghi’s writing is often confused with contemporary mythology or revisionist

mythology practiced by writers like Ashok K Banker or Amish Tripathi. Sanghi’s work, contrary to theirs, offers a slice of the past while bringing it into present-day context, formulating a thriller that questions, embellishes or justifies historical accounts. “What excites me isn’t a reinterpretation of mythology, but rather, to take a story, then dig a little deeper and ask, ‘Is there a historical basis to this?’ Reams have been written about Krishna—he’s the lovable cowherd, the butter thief, the statesman, the strategist. For me, what’s interesting is to explore if these stories are based on a real character called Krishna. *Mirch masala* aside, did the Mahabharata War really happen, or did Sage Vyas sit down and write a beautiful fiction? That’s what gets my adrenaline pumping,” he says, his voice brimming with passion.

Leaning forward and displaying a similar passion, Devidayal tells me that she is unconcerned with rules or restrictions when it comes to her writing. After a memoir and then a fiction novel, she is now writing a travelogue. Her purpose is simple: “I don’t like the idea of boxing myself in. I wear so many hats as a human being. I may be a serious classical singer in the morning and could be partying with my friends in the most ditzy way in the evening. And the two don’t contradict each other. Similarly, the two books I’ve written are completely different, but both were forms of expression.” She shows me to her sunlit room, wide and spacious, in her Breach Candy home, where the windows open to Gulmohar trees and sloping rooftops. Her long desk running along one wall of the room holds her trusty Macintosh, and her working area is in some disarray, with shelves sagging under the weight of books. She tells me that she wants her stories to be enjoyed by her readers,

to provide food for thought, to involve their emotions. More than anything else, “I want to tell a good story,” she says, resolutely.

### Work is no play

Every writer knows what telling a good story entails. It is hardly as easy as it sounds. To tell her recent story, *Aftertaste*, Devidayal not only ventured in and out of the by lanes of Mumbai’s Kalbadevi (where her story is based) with her dad, but also tasted typical Marwari *mithai*. She even spoke to her uncle, Jaikishan Somany (who still runs his business on the *partha* system), who gave her bits of inside information, like secret compartments that Marwaris used to build inside cupboards. It is these tidbits that make the book so special. “I also spent a lot of time going through the archives of *The Times of India*, going back to the 40s and the 50s. Not only do you get





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news of the time, but you also see the advertisements, the little nuggets, that give you a sense of that whole time,” she says. This period nostalgia also plays a huge role in making her narrative believable. Her experience in journalism also contributed in helping her craft the arresting visual detail that the book offers; but it is Devidayal’s own childhood and growing years that made her into the author she is. Born to Meera and Bhagwat Devidayal, her childhood was very bohemian with emphasis on the arts. Her mother, who is from Delhi’s well-known Marwari Sriram family, was a huge influence, and it is because of her that Devidayal has such an insight into the Marwari family dynamics—after all, this is the theme of *Aftertaste*.

Quoting Nathaniel Hawthorne’s famous line, ‘Easy reading is damn hard writing,’ Ashwin Sanghi grins when I ask him how he deals with the ‘popular writer’ tag, which can be either praise or denouncement. “That just means that a lot of people read my books!” he says. Sanghi’s research is both academic and hands-on. “For me the excitement is going to see a physical structure and saying, ‘Oh, the person I have heard of, could he have been here, touched this?’” He may sound romantic, even naïve, but he takes his writing very seriously. At the end of eight months, Sanghi creates the historical markers that support the structure of his book with well-accepted historical and mythological



facts. His interest in these subjects stems from the stories of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, of flying *sadhus* and alchemy that he heard from his *nana* and *nani* in Kanpur. He began “serious” reading when, at the age of 12, his granduncle, Shri Ram Gopal Gupta, began sending him Dickens, Tolstoy and other literary giants from his private library. His mother, Manju Sanghi, on the other hand, gave him bestsellers from Sidney Sheldon to Irving Wallace. There was a lovely dichotomy in his reading habits, and this love for ponderous subjects and racy writing certainly translates well on paper.

### New territories

Sanghi’s latest storyline represents a shift from his usual repertoire of subjects. This time, the pillars on which he constructs his story involves not mythology but post-Independence India, where he will explore India’s development through the eyes of the three generations of a business family. As Sanghi challenges himself, unafraid

to experiment, he also tells me of his plans to pursue a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Wales, Bangor. This businessman-by-day may just see a whole new side of his craft, and finally take on a full-time career in writing. Devidayal’s latest book is another shift in genre; she is working on a travelogue exploring music in South Asia. Given the popularity of her first book on music (which had personliaties across the globe, from Mick Jagger to Sonia Gandhi, commend her), we are certain her latest book will not disappoint.

It takes indomitable courage to keep from surrendering to a formula, and the fact that these writers are willing to follow their hearts is one of their most appealing characteristics, which comes through not only in their personalities, but also in their books. In their endeavours, they prompt us to think about a world we had never encountered before, to laugh or shed a tear, and in making this tenuous connection with us, showcase the power of the written word. ☀