

THE DOUBLE LIFE OF SHAWN HAIGINS

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He is a scion of a Mumbai-based business group, and most of his fellow Marwaris can't understand why he is obsessed with Jesus Christ, Chanakya and the ancient Hindus. **Jaideep Dave** uncovers the remarkable story of a businessman and author, who had to self-publish his first book under a pseudonym, and who has become one of India's most successful popular fiction writers



THE WRITE STUFF

Say what you will about Marwaris, you can't accuse the young men of the community of being scatter-brained. The typical Marwari boy has his whole career mapped out before him, by his parents, and 'knows' the exciting twists and turns his life will involve. He knows that he will have to, as soon as he begins to sprout facial hair, lend a hand in his father's enterprise. He has to get his Masters degree in the USA, preferably from an Ivy League college, and master all the chief necessities of expanding one's family business. He must ensure that his sister gets married before turning 22 and a half, and he must himself march into the rattrap before turning 25. Let some rebellious, star-gazing Maru wish to extricate himself from the stifling yoke of convention, and toy with writing or music or, say, hairstyling, and the decision would sound, to both Marwaris and non-Marwaris, a bit shocking.

Before Ashwin Sanghi started writing his first book — a theological thriller called *The Rozabal Line* — in 2005, he was a typical rich Marwari. The writer, whose second book, *Chanakya's Chant*, has sold about 1,20,000 copies, started working in his family business at 16. A third-generation scion of Mumbai-based MK Sanghi Group, which is involved in a slew of businesses, ranging from automobile dealerships (the group owns Vitesse, the oldest dealer of Maruti cars in Mumbai) to manufacturing industrial gases to real estate, Sanghi completed his MBA from Yale University, and came back, at 22, to India to re-join his family enterprise. "I was a businessman, for all practical purposes, and that was pretty much the direction of my life," Sanghi tells me, when I meet him at his posh residence, in south Mumbai.

These days, of course, Sanghi wears two hats: a businessman by day and a writer after the sun sets. The 43-year-old has just released his third book, *The Krishna Key*, but he tells me that he is still seen as a cultural oddity. "I am the proverbial circus act. When I land up for a family function or a wedding, I can hear the little whispers. From the corner of my eye, I can see someone is pointing at me and saying, 'See, he is the writer, the weird one!'"

The Krishna Key, which, through murder mystery, explores the recondite and superior knowledge ancient Hindus are supposed to have possessed, is, as I write this, ranked number two in the AC Nielsen-Hindustan Times' weekly top fiction bestsellers list. I was present at the book's packed Mumbai

launch last month. Feature writers wanted to interview Sanghi and find out how a man who was compelled to self-publish his first book became such a hot property. Newly appointed book reviewers were curious to know how the author's works have, despite having more literary merit than Chetan Bhagat's books, managed to achieve mass popularity. Film journalists wanted to find out whether *The Krishna Key*, too, had the potential to be turned into a movie, just like *Chanakya's Chant*, whose film rights have been bought by Disney UTV. Conspiracy theory buffs shook Sanghi's hand, and told him that they stood

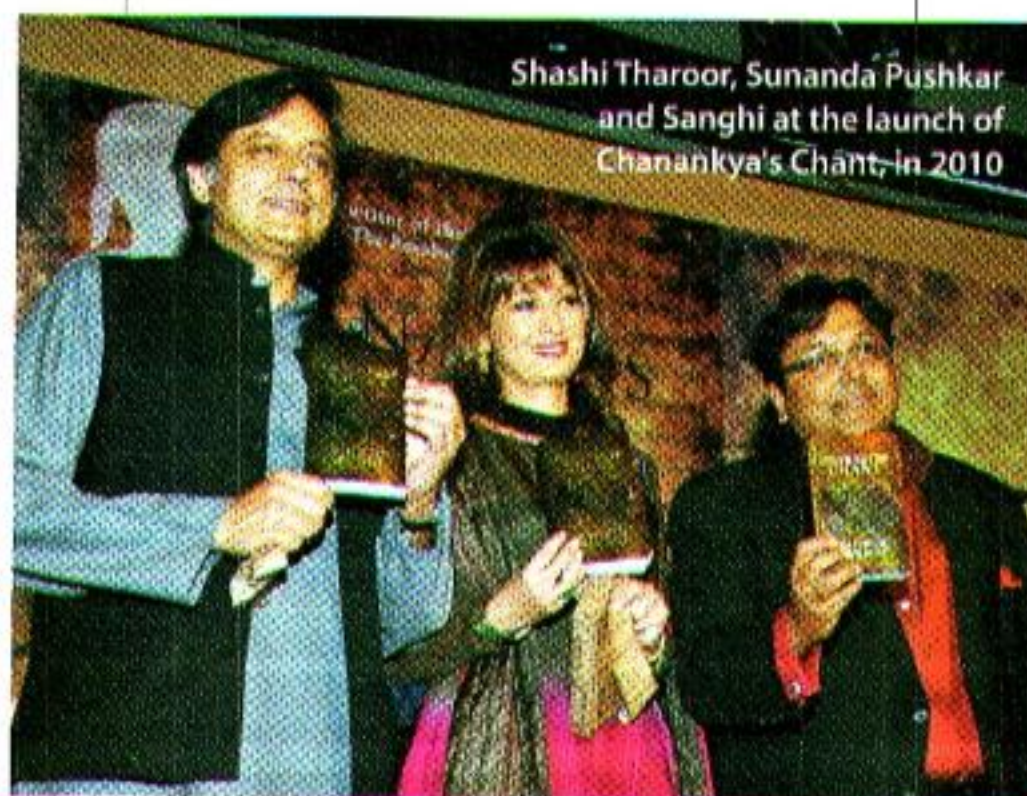
than Jesus Christ. A couple of years prior to this visit to Srinagar, Sanghi had read a few books pertaining to Jesus living in India, and here he was, with his wife, seeing first hand something that was shrouded in layers of mystery. Here, indeed, was a riddle. "I was fascinated with the idea that Jesus could have lived in India," he says.

Over the next couple of years, Sanghi would delve into this possibility. He would often come back from work and plunge into his study room and read avidly. He would sometimes wake up at 6 am and pore through history books. The subject had Sanghi in its thrall. "There was nothing else I wanted to talk about, nothing else I wanted to discuss. My wife was frustrated, and one day, she turned around and told me, 'Listen you have read all these books, you have these multiple theories spinning in your head, and you keep on making obscure points about this issue. Why don't you sit down and formulate a story around it. Why don't you tie these threads together? If you say there is a shrine in Kashmir that could be a resting place for Jesus Christ, why not establish a theory as to why he came there in the first place,'" says Sanghi, who had ended up "devouring" about 50 books before he decided to write *The*

Rozabal Line.

Sanghi wanted to "connect all the dots", establish a plausible theory, and popularise it, but he knew that writing a non-fiction work would do nothing, save add to the pile of the world's unread books. So he settled upon popular fiction as the genre to communicate his ideas. It took him about 18 months to finish the book, after which he began the agonising struggle to find a publisher. He sent out, over the next one year, more than 150 copies of his manuscript/book proposals to literary agents/publishers, both Indian and global. "I think I got about 20 to 30 responses. Everyone said, 'thanks but no thanks. Some of them said, 'This doesn't fit in with our portfolio'; others said, 'Indian writers shouldn't be writing theological thrillers'. In addition, there were some guys who said my writing was bad...," says Sanghi. "The long and short of it was: I was nowhere close to being published."

The repeated failures frustrated Sanghi so much that he self-published his book, in 2007, through lulu.com, a print-on-demand publishing service. "Ninety-nine dollars got you an ISBN number, and Lulu would make sure that your book was available on all the major online retail sites, like amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com."



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convinced that Jesus spent his final years in Kashmir, as Sanghi, indeed, theorises in *The Rozabal Line*.

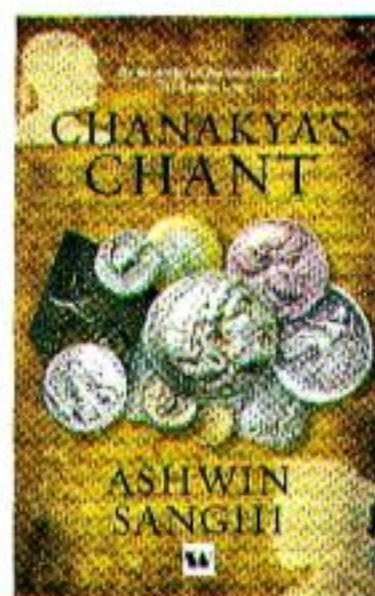
Sanghi's story owes a lot to his 2003 visit to, well, Rozabal Shrine, a Muslim burial place in Kashmir. The Muslims bury their dead in a north-south direction, yet one of the two tombs here is known to be aligned in an east-west direction, in line with Jewish custom. This tomb's recorded history goes back till 112 AD, and many believe that what Muslims think is the death bed of a holy man called Yuz Asaph (literally: 'healer of the ill') is actually the resting place of none other

But Sanghi soon realised that self-publishing a book was one thing, publicising it and getting it read was another. "The average number of copies that a self-published title sells is 57 — 57 in a lifetime! So, I started contacting bloggers and offered them a free copy if they agreed to review my book". Every day, Sanghi would target 10 bloggers, and, in four months, due to the coverage he got, *The Rozabal Line* sold more than 800 copies.

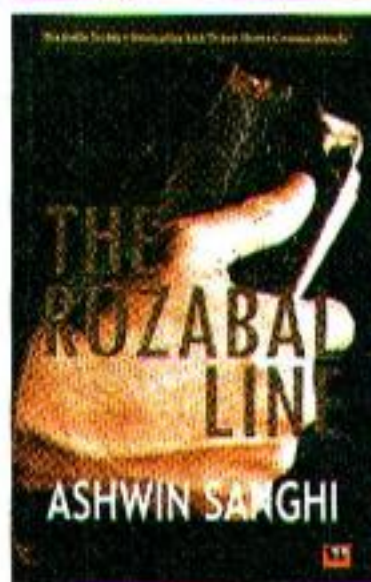
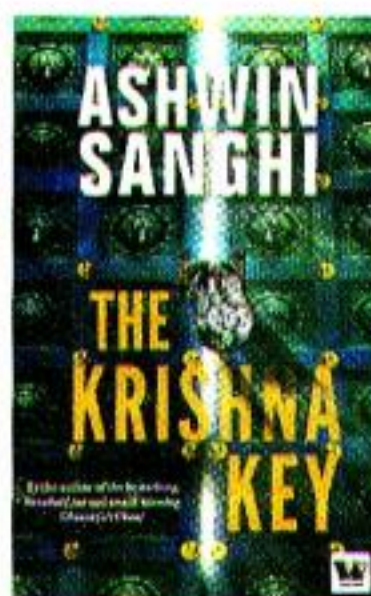
One of those copies, in what can be described only as a stroke of serendipity, landed in the hands of Hemu Ramaiah, founder of the Landmark bookstore chain, which owns Westland, Sanghi's publisher. "She tracked me down through a common friend," says Sanghi, who had published the book under a pseudonym (Shawn Haigins, an anagram of his name), for fear of being ridiculed as 'a bad writer'. "She asked me why had I not published the book, and I said, it was not for want of trying. She told me it would be a terrific book to publish, as long as I was willing to invest two to three months in the editing of it."

The Rozabal Line was re-published by Westland in October 2008. In a month, about 7,000 copies of the thriller were sold, and it remained one of the topselling fiction books for about five months. "I told myself, if my book is doing so well, I cannot be that bad, and maybe, I should write another one."

Sanghi is a portly, bespectacled man, given frequently to smiles as well as jocosity. His narration of his life's story overflows with enthusiasm. He tells me that he had always been a voracious reader, and the seeds of his love for literature were planted and watered by his maternal grandfather. From Kanpur, the old man would send Sanghi a book every week, "from Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle, to Dickens and Tolstoy, and even erotic books such as *Fanny Hill*." It was a practice that lasted till around 1995. In addition, there was also the salubrious influence of his mother, a bestseller junkie. These miscellaneous readings widened his knowledge, but, more importantly, also played a role in shaping what seems to be his writing credo: "Easy reading is damned hard writing." Some might not admire or like his books, but most of his critics will concede that his pages chase each other like rabbits, and they make for a smooth, if not always gripping, read. His writing is free of pretentiousness, fakery and adjective-flinging. For him, one might use appreciatively the line which Faulkner employed to describe Hemingway: "He has never been known to use a word that might send a reader to the dictionary".



Sanghi's first book, *The Rozabal Line*, theorizes that Jesus lived in India; about 120,000 copies of *Chanakya's Chant* have been sold; *The Krishna Key* explores the recondite knowledge the ancient Hindus could have possessed



Obviously, this is a major reason why Sanghi is so popular, leaving aside the bombs of information that his books blast regularly. (*The Krishna Key*, for example, references 50 books and 43 research papers.) Here's a glance at some of the reviews Sanghi's latest book has garnered on goodreads.com.

"I have to acknowledge the hard work that the Author must have put into the book. From Mahabharata to the Vedas to the different Indian civilizations, he has thoroughly researched everything. I had no idea about a lot of things that were mentioned in the book and I was intrigued enough to actually look them up. Also, to actually build that information and provide it in the package of a thriller must have been difficult," writes Debdatta Dasgupta Sahay.

There are also, of course, cribs:

"The characters are a little stilted, the writing tedious, but the story still manages to thrill (just a bit)," writes Aparna.

The great Goethe believed that any critic, venturing to judge a work of art, must first ask the question: "What did the author set out to do?" So, what did Sanghi set out to do? "Honestly, characters, for me, are incidental. For me, what drives the story is my plot and my 'aha' moments," says Sanghi. His three important things, he says, amending Vidya Balan, are plot, plot and plot. Sanghi says that his plots emerge organically from his arduous research. And to organise all his research, he has even got

a software developed. "All my chapters can be presented in the form of outlines, all my images can be indexed against certain subjects, I can save PDF files... Everything in one single place," says Sanghi, who got this tool made during the composition of *Chanakya's Chant*, after finding himself struggling in the spider web of his research notes.

"Suppose I come across an interesting bit while I am reading, that particular page goes into my scanner and, after it's scanned in, I will attach a lot of tags to it." By the end of his research, he will have his "markers": "the points in my book which are based on research". It might not always be hardcore evidence; some of it may even be disputed. "Once I have these markers, my plot formation starts: deciding the things I definitely want to throw into the plot, and structuring the plot so that it will have enough twist and turns." After he completed his research for *Chanakya's Chant*, Sanghi says, he covered a wall in his study with chart paper and spent three months drawing a plot outline. And every chapter was plotted out. "I wanted to make sure there was a thrill on every alternate page, so that the pages keep turning. Writing *Chanakya's Chant* was, relatively, a breeze, and I finished it in about four months after I had created the plot outline."

Traditionally, a writer's task was over when he had finished the book: 'Once the book is out, the writer must shut up, and let his book do the talking', went the commandment. But today, this philosophy is living its last days, thanks largely to the internet. And Sanghi, it seems, knows this. He has more than 120,000 followers on Twitter; he has a Facebook page on which he engages with his fans; his Mumbai book launch was aired live on YouTube, and he had a queue of fans — a lot of them who had previously interacted with him on Facebook — waiting to get their books signed.

Sanghi is also involved in marketing activities that are, usually, a monopoly of the publisher. "If you are going to spend, let's say, 18-24 months in writing something, the least you can do is invest another six months in making sure it reaches the widest readership possible. I am reluctant to just let go and say, 'Now the book is either sold or not, because the publisher has either performed or not.'"

But he sees these activities as a necessary evil, and doesn't enjoy them much. "It's the writing process I enjoy: the process of creating a book. I feel depressed when I finish it; it's almost as if a love affair has come to an end. If it were left to me, I would never want my projects to be completed." ☹