

really die in an air crash or did he survive and go into hiding? Was Lal Bahadur Shastri's death in Tashkent from natural causes or was he killed? Did Neil Armstrong really walk on the moon in 1969 or did NASA fake the event in order to win the space race against the Soviets? Was the AIDS virus engineered in a laboratory in order to reduce world population? Did Elyis actually die or does he continue to walk the earth? The list is endless.

The fact of the matter is that a fictional premise becomes much more enticing and believable when it is laced with real world events that are open to alternative interpretation. For example, in my recent novel, *The Krishna Key*, I chose to compare the outward appearance of the *Shiv Lingam* with the shape and features of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Mumbai. The structures are phallic in shape, both are surrounded by coils that carry water, and both have a spout from which the water may be released. This does not imply that BARC is a *Shiv Lingam* nor does it indicate that the *Shiv Lingam* has nuclear properties. The tantalising question, however, is 'What if...?'

What if the *Shiv Lingam* is actually a symbol of ancient nuclear technology? What if the age of the Mahabharata was more advanced than our present age? What if the *Brahmastra* mentioned in the epic was actually a nuclear device?

In and by itself, my comparison may not have evoked much of an endorsement but I followed up the question by exploring the reason why Hindus place *Bel* leaves on a *Shiv Lingam*? 'Why *Bel*?' I asked myself, 'Why not fruits, flowers or mango leaves?' As I dug deeper, I found an interesting study entitled *Evaluation of the Radioprotective Effect of Aegle marmelos* by Jagetia, Venkatesh and Baliga. The research study claimed that *Aegle marmelos*—or *Bel*—had the unique characteristic of being able to absorb excess radiation. Once I had combined the results of this theory with the 'What if?' question, my story moved from the realm of

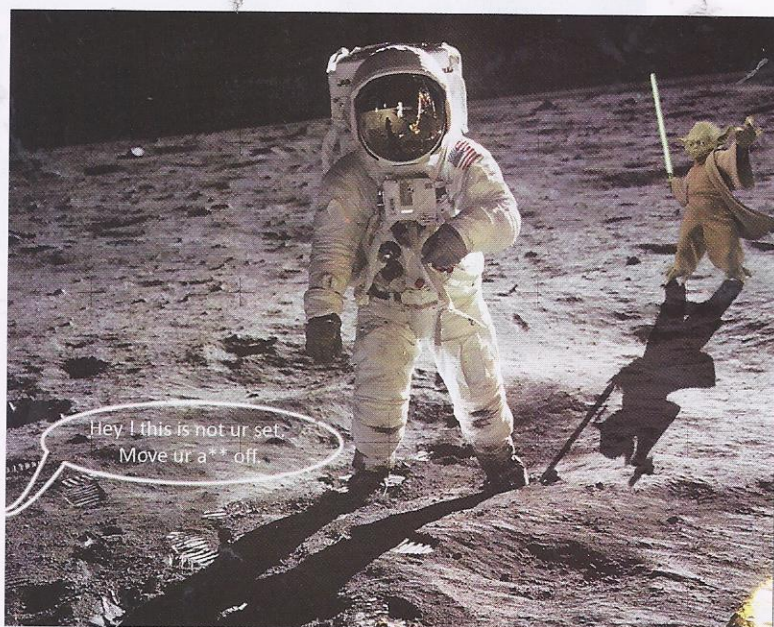
fantasy into the zone of conspiracy theory.

In fact, I would never have started writing had it not been for another conspiracy theory, a slightly more famous one, courtesy Dan Brown. I was in Kashmir on a short visit. In the heart of Srinagar lies a tomb known as *Rauzabal*. While there is a Shia Muslim saint, Mir Sayyid Naseeruddin, buried there along an Islamic North-South axis, what is even more interesting is the fact that there is an older body buried beneath that of the saint and this one is placed along the Jewish East-West axis. Historical documents show that the tomb has existed since AD 112 and this leads to the enticing possibility that the older body may be that of Jesus Christ. There have been numerous alternative theories regarding the crucifixion and one of them explores the possibility that Jesus did not die on the cross and that he was taken down, medicated and eventually spirited away to safety. 'Why not to India?' I asked myself during that trip to Kashmir. That question was the genesis of my first novel *The Rozabal Line*.

The world's greatest spy novel writer, John le Carré, once said, 'We have learned in recent years to translate almost all of political life in terms of conspiracy. And the spy novel, as never before, really has come into its own.' I agree wholeheartedly. Unless, of course, I was to view all commercial fiction—including adventures, murder mysteries, mythological fantasies, theological thrillers, campus romances, chick lit and spy novels—as a vast conspiracy to destroy literature! **M**

Ashwin Sanghi is the bestselling author of *The Rozabal Line*, *Chanakya's Chant* and *The Krishna Key*.





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