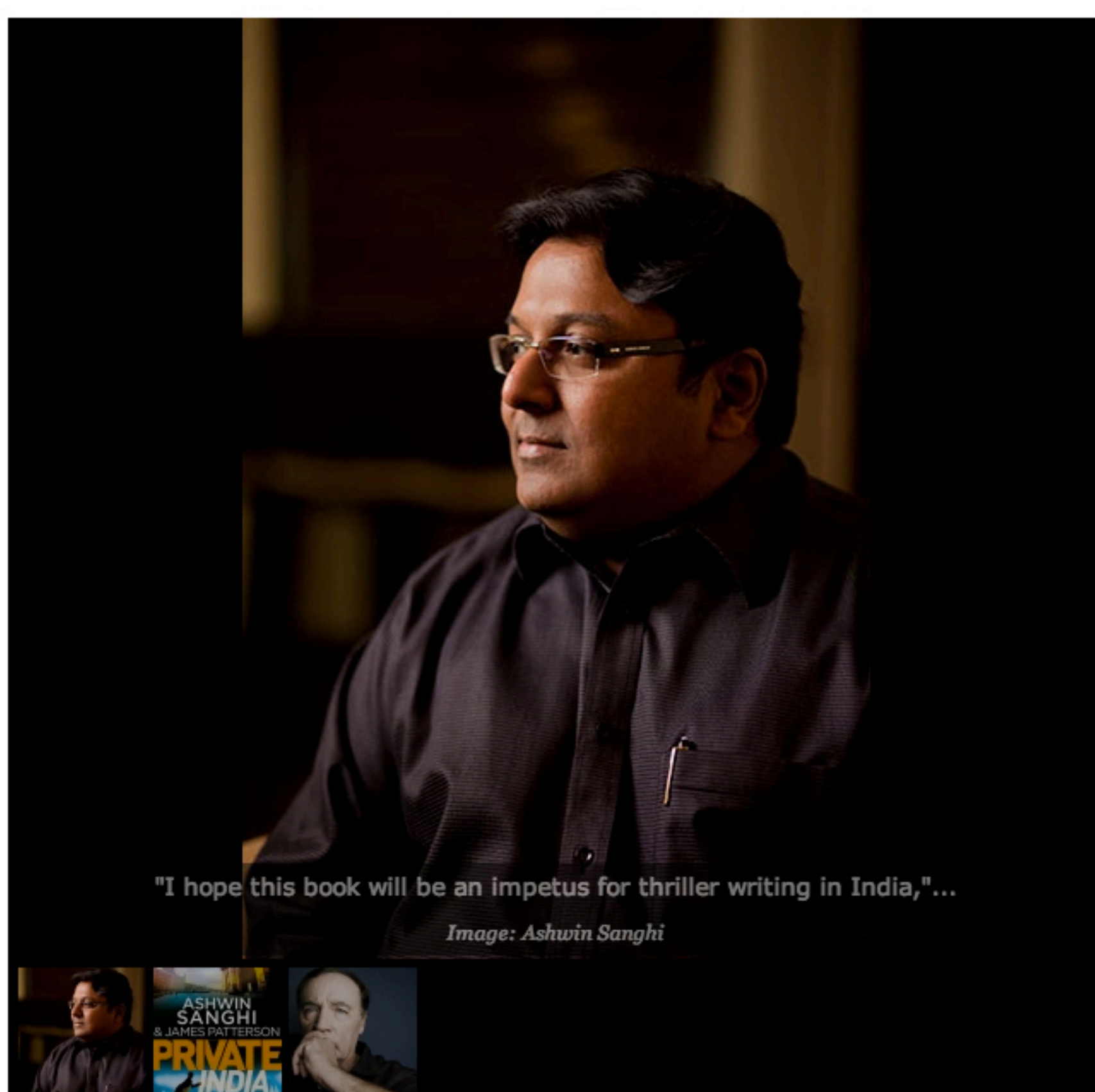


Culture & Entertaining

Ashwin Sanghi: 'I'm not the Dan Brown of India'

Sanya Khetani | 25 Jul 2014



James Patterson, one of the most successful thriller writers in the world, has collaborated with Indian author Ashwin Sanghi (*The Krishna Key*) on bringing his popular *Private* series of detective novels to India, with *Private India* releasing in India on July 21.

"I set my *Private* books all over the world and India, with its vibrant and chaotic cities, and rich history and heritage, could be no better place to set *Private*'s next adventure," says Patterson.

Private India takes *Private Incorporated*, a detective agency headquartered in LA with global affiliates, to its newest office in Mumbai. Headed by Santosh Wagh, a man with a troubled past investigating a case that has baffled the police: women in the city are being strangled to death with yellow scarves, with strange objects left near their bodies.

The book is the perfect Patterson potboiler, complete with cliffhangers, state-of-the-art crime-solving technology and an unexpected final twist. But what sets it apart from your typical Patterson/Grisham/Baldacci novel is its relatable setting: Regal cinema, Juhu beach and other Mumbai landmarks find their way into the book. "Working with Ashwin enabled the book to have a real local feel -- he provided the uniquely Indian element," says Patterson.

Vogue sat down for an interview with the Indian crime novelist in Mumbai.

Sanya Khetani: How and when did you connect with James Patterson?

Ashwin Sanghi: The Random House UK team [which handles Patterson's non-US sales] was on the lookout for someone to partner with James on this particular novel for India. They got in touch with me. While I was very excited, I was also a little concerned because my previous books have always been within the space of history and mythology. But James said, "You craft the story, so you are free to add in elements that work for you."

SK: How collaborative was the writing process?

AS: I framed a detailed plot outline for James, which ended up being about twice as long as any I've done for my own books. Then James went over the plotline, making suggestions on the pace. After finally having an outline that was acceptable to both of us, I wrote the first draft, he wrote the second. When both of us were done with our respective comments, it went back to the editors.

SK: Why do you think a series like *Private* has universal appeal and is so easily adaptable to different countries?

AS: I think we all find happiness in the misery of someone else... *schadenfreude*. And there is also a voyeuristic element in all of us. That's what makes crime thrillers so interesting. I think that's probably the reason people get hooked to the evening news, or their fix of the morning newspaper: they're getting a glimpse into the darker side of things that they're so far removed from. The most ordinary looking person on the street could be the most vicious killer. That is exciting anywhere, whether it's Australia, LA, Berlin, London or India.

SK: How did you conduct your research for *Private India*?

AS: The research for this book was very different to the ones I've done previously, because they were based on history and mythology. Those books involved much more reading because you're trying to figure out, "What are the things I can build between the lines?" But here, the research involved more 'doing', like visiting a morgue, spending a day with a private investigator, meeting a senior police officer to find out how interrogation techniques work.

SK: Did you worry your settings and characters might fall into any Mumbai or Indian stereotypes?

AS: No. I have always believed that you should tell it like it is to the reader, without any preconceived notions. So, for me, it's not about glorifying something or coming from a specific agenda.

SK: (Spoiler!) Do you think Santosh will come back to *Private India*? Will there be another book?

AS: (Laughs) We purposely left it there because we wanted our readers to yearn for Santosh to come back. But when that will happen is a question mark.

SK: Would you want it to happen?

AS: What I would like to see happen is the art of thriller writing develop in this country. Maybe this [book] will be an impetus for it and people will start looking at thrillers as a serious genre. Until now, we've seen Indian writers doing many more romance, IIM/IIT-set novels. Thriller writing actually requires tremendous discipline because you don't have the luxury of being able to sit with a blank piece of paper and say, "I'm going to start writing." There's a lot more crafting that happens before you start writing that first word.

SK: Why are you inspired by history and mythology?

AS: I think because they always hold the tantalizing element of the unknown. How is a thrill caused? It's an unanswered question. And that is what makes you want to plough on. I've always believed that a good book is one where the pages turn themselves. What interests me is the overlap between history and mythology. Could some of our mythological characters be real, historical figures? How much of what we read as fact now, is actually old fiction?

SK: You have been called the 'Dan Brown of India'...

AS: That was a flawed comparison. *The Da Vinci Code* had become very popular and when I wrote *The Rozabal Line*, which also revolved around Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene, it was logical to say, "This is a Dan Brown spinoff," even though the two books were very different. That tag became more of a liability for me: those who did not like Dan Brown didn't want to read my book and people who read my book because they thought it would be like Brown's were disappointed when it wasn't! I hope that one day, Indian writers have enough international clout to be recognised for what we are, individually.

SK: Are you working on any new books or any other collaborations?

AS: I am currently working on a novel called *The Sialkot Saga*. This one is a business mystery that kicks off in 1947, at the time of Partition, so it gave me a chance to go back into modern history. This book is close to my heart, and if all goes well, I should be able to publish it by June next year.

Private India released on July 21 and is now available on [Flipkart](#) and [Amazon](#).