

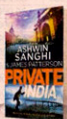


■ Author Ashwin Sanghi at a book reading

KALPAK PATHAK/ HT PHOTO

## MORE BEMUSED THAN BREATHLESS

**Private India, which is replete with Glocks, geeks, emotion and drama, is a slick product for the mass market**



**Private India**  
Ashwin Sanghi  
& James Patterson  
Random House India  
₹350 PP 448

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**W**hat kind of an animal is the Indian thriller reader?

Is he a fastidious university professor with a le Carre fetish who prefers his books to drip with intrigue? A Forsyth fan who revels in attention to detail? An Archer die-hard who demands more than a dollop of emotional drama in the plot?

If the people behind Private India will have you believe, you can safely uncheck the above boxes and put a firm tick in the one that proclaims in extra large point size: The average Indian thriller reader is the average Bollywood fan — he who leaves his intelligence behind while enjoying the ride.

Private India is part of a series of books: Private London, Private New York, Private L.A., Private Paris and, well... you get the idea.

Each one of these books is about Private, an international detective agency headed by ex-marine Jack Morgan — who also features in the tale. The books are written by James Patterson in collaboration with another author — in this case, Ashwin Sanghi.

In the Indian avatar of the series, we are introduced to Santosh Wagh, the Indian head of operations of Private, and his comrades. Wagh himself is faithful to the stereotype of the shamus, nursing in turns a bottle of scotch, the obligatory dark secret and given to flights of ratiocination.

Wagh and his colleagues are called to investigate a murder in a hotel room. The

**WE ARE INTRODUCED TO FIGURES FROM THE UNDERWORLD, SPOT FIXING AND THE MUJAHEDDEEN BEFORE THE CASE IS SOLVED**

victim has a yellow scarf around her neck and her hands are tied with strings. Random objects, a flower, a fork and a Viking toy helmet are placed on her body.

Before we know it, there is another murder and soon the Indian branch of Private is on the trail of a serial killer. The victims have a yellow scarf, with trinkets placed around them.

As the story rapidly unfurls, we are introduced to figures from underworld, god men, spot fixing, mythology, terrorism, the tower of silence, corrupt cops and the mujahedeen before the case is solved. (It is difficult to say more here without giving away the plot).

While all the ingredients are showcased slickly (everyone carries Glocks, geeks spout convincing tech jargon, the hero douses his hangover with Alka Seltzer), the decision to infuse Action, Emotion, Drama, bizarre twists and an unnecessary gravitas overwhelms the narrative and the book begins to crumble — and eventually falls prey to what it sets out to be, a product manufactured for the mass market.

Which is a pity as Private India has quite a few elements working for it. Unusual characters, a serial killer with an original modus operandi, snappy dialogue and a refreshing portrayal of Mumbai. Had Patterson and Sanghi been content to present the tale as a lean-n-mean thriller — a ruthless game between a sophisticated detective agency and an Indian serial killer — this would have been a satisfying whodunit.

If you want a fast-paced read and are unconcerned with logic and credulity, Private India is worth picking up. But the chances are that the book will leave you more bemused than breathless.

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