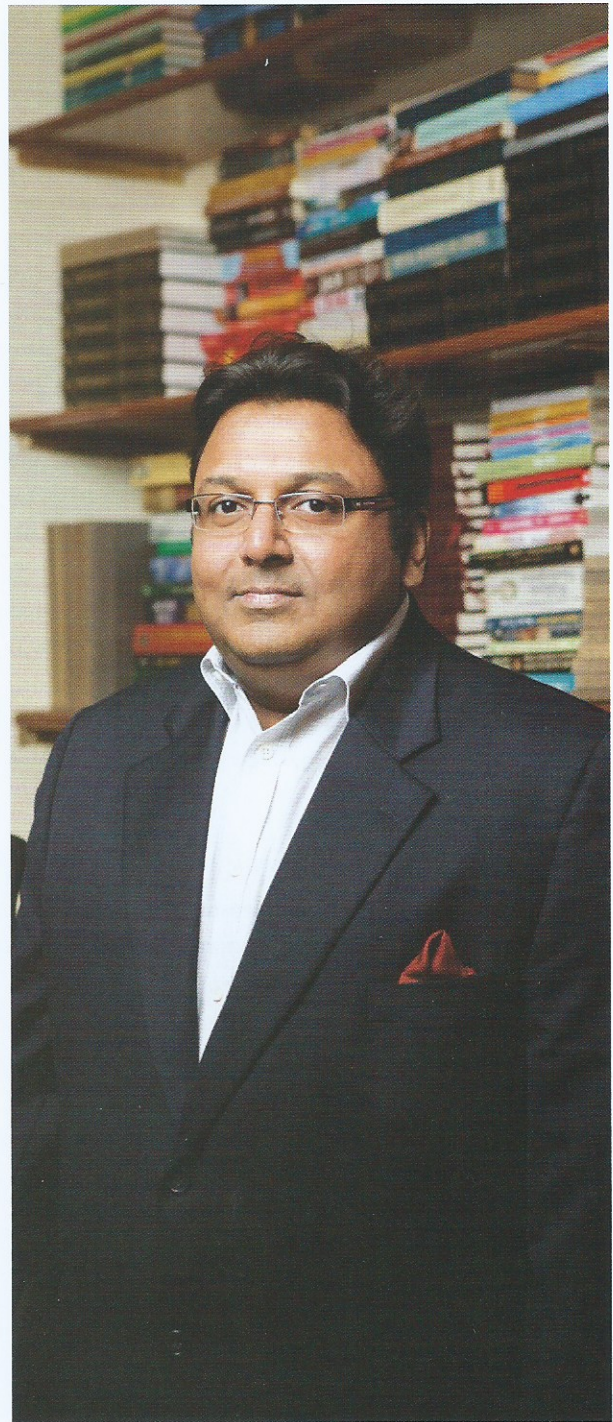


“There is no writer’s block that a peg of single malt can’t cure”

The author of books like *The Krishna Key* and *Chanakya’s Chant*, **Ashwin Sanghi** is one of the most popular Indian writers in English fiction. Before hitting it big time — he is known as ‘The Dan Brown of India’, and most of his books have mythological, historical or theological themes — Sanghi had to face an arduous struggle: he was compelled to self-publish his first book, *The Rozabal Line*. His latest work, *Private India*, is a collaborative effort with the US-based bestselling sensation and crime fiction author **James Patterson**. In this interview with **JAIDEEP DAVE**, Sanghi recounts his struggle, talks about authorpreneurship and more.



Ashwin Sanghi

You use a software to organise the research you do and chart out the plot of your book. Tell us more about it.

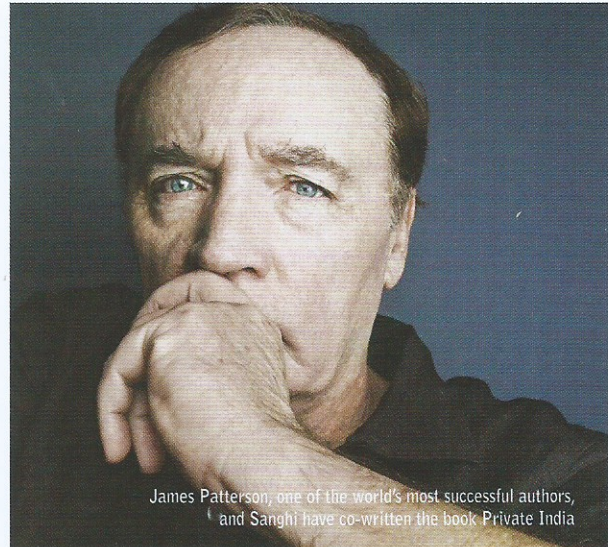
I use a custom-built database system that allows me to collate articles, PDF files, book extracts, images and web links while tagging them. The system enables me to access my research at a lightening speed. For plotting, I use Excel spreadsheets that allow me to develop each chapter sequentially. For my writing, I use Scrivener, which enables me to break down my writing into manageable chunks.

How did collaboration with James Patterson come about? How much of *Private India* was written by you?

It was JP's London-based publisher who reached out to me and asked whether I would be interested in penning an India-based thriller along with the master storyteller. I was slightly concerned that I would be attempting something different from the beaten path. After all, my previous books were thrillers, but thrillers with an abundance of history and mythology. 'Private India', on the other hand, was meant to be a purely contemporary crime thriller. But JP took care of that. He suggested that I should frame the plot outline. This meant that I was free to introduce elements that excited me. JP then provided a guideline as well as an existing set of characters that need to be woven into the story. Using his guideline, I developed the plot outline. We discussed the plot outline in detail and froze it after amendments by JP. I then proceed to write the first draft. The final draft was written by JP. All of this happened with periodic interactions over email.

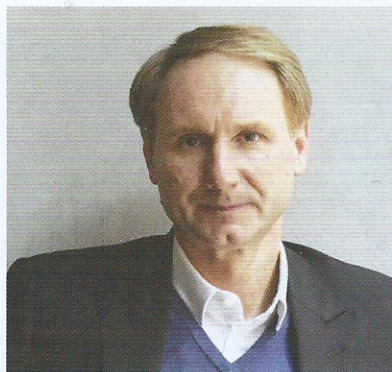
If you can just recount your struggle before you found your first publisher...

I wrote my first novel, *The Rozabal*



James Patterson, one of the world's most successful authors, and Sanghi have co-written the book *Private India*

Line, in 2005. After I had completed writing the book, I sent out letters and manuscript copies to a few hundred publishers and literary agents. Unfortunately, no one seemed interested in publishing it. The quest for a publisher lasted a year. After 47 rejections, I decided that enough was enough. A new Print-on-Demand service—commonly known as POD—had just kicked off in America. All you needed was a PDF file of your manuscript and a basic cover design. You could upload these elements to the service's website and the service would make your book available on all major book retailing websites such as Amazon, Barnes & Noble, WH Smith etc. without charging any upfront fee. The service would simply take a percentage of the revenue from subsequent sales. I went the POD way in 2007 and my book went on sale as a self-published work under my pseudonym 'Shawn Haigins'. I ended up selling just around 900 books through the self-published route but I enjoyed it immensely



Sanghi is often called India's Dan Brown

because it was an opportunity to learn everything about the book trade. In 2008, a copy of my self-published book landed in the hands of my current publisher, Westland, and they offered to publish it for me in India. I was lucky that it went on to become a bestseller in India. The rest, as they say, is history.

They often call you 'The Dan Brown of India'. What's your take on his books?

I'm flattered because Dan Brown is one of the greatest theological thriller writers that the world has seen. The comparison is misplaced, though. While it is true that we both write what is commonly viewed as 'conspiracy fiction' our styles and treatment of subjects is radically different. And yes, I have read all of Brown's books and am one of his biggest fans. I had the wonderful opportunity of meeting him in Mumbai recently and having dinner with him at The Oberoi, where he was staying. We ended up talking about mysteries, secrets, religion, government, conspiracies and god, late into the night.

Who are the people who read your drafts when you are writing a book? And who are the editors you work with?

For me, a good book is one in which the pages turn themselves. My attention span is very low and I get bored very easily. My wife is always upset with me for leaving a movie midway because I have usually figured out the

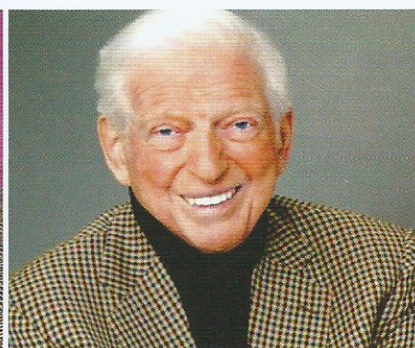
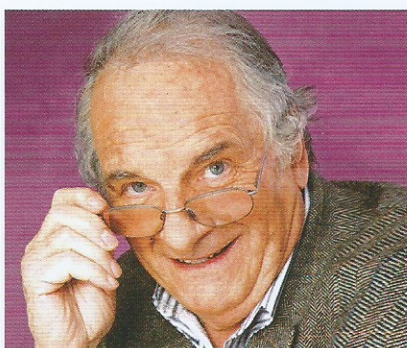
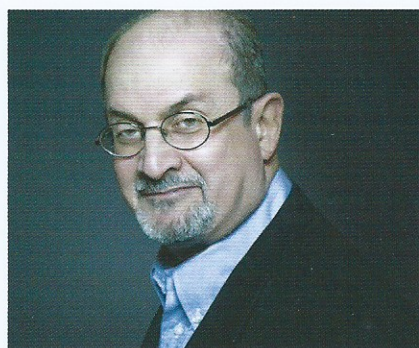
ending and simply do not have the patience to sit through the rest of it. I grew up reading fast-paced fiction by Robert Ludlum, Frederick Forsyth, Tom Clancy, Stephen King, Irving Wallace, Jeffrey Archer, Sidney Sheldon, Ken Follett, Wilbur Smith and several others. I love the adrenaline rush brought on by an unexpected twist in the tale. I keep sharing chunks of my work-in-progress with my publisher, Gautam Padmanabhan, my editor Prita Maitra and a couple of very close friends who are avid readers. The only question that I put to them is this: did the pages turn themselves or did you have to turn them?

Are you an assiduous rewriter?

Oh, absolutely. I am a terrible writer but a fairly good rewriter. I thank my stars that I am a writer living in the age of word processing rather than in the the age of the typewriter! I simply do not know how I would manage without the ability to constantly rework my sentences or review my research.

What have been some of the best comments of praise your books have earned? And what have been some of the sharpest words of criticism they have drawn?

When I had just self-published The Rozabal Line, one of the reviewers wrote a scathing article. In it she went on to say that the book was a good one but that it should have stopped on page ten! Ouch! When the book came



Left to right: Salman Rushdie, Dominique Lapierre and Sidney Sheldon have, in their own way, influenced Sanghi

out in India, one of the most respected reviewers wrote that “We do a great disservice by comparing Ashwin Sanghi to Dan Brown because Sanghi is so much more”. Just goes to show that any creative work will be perceived differently by various people. If I had taken the first reviewer seriously and given up, I would never have had the opportunity to read the second. In any case, reviews rarely influence book sales!

Which writers have had the biggest influence on you — your worldview or your writing style?

It's difficult to say because I grew up reading both classics as well as potboilers. My spiritual sense is influenced by Paramahansa Yogananda, my love for fast pace and racy plots is influenced by Brown and Forsythe, my fascination with historical retelling is inspired by Dominique Lapierre, my passion for research is fuelled by Arthur Hailey and my Indianness of voice is influenced by Salman Rushdie. The truth is that, as I mentioned, I was brought up on a diet of commercial fiction and thrillers for most of my growing years: Archer, Sheldon, Robert Ludlum, Frederick Forsyth, Irving Wallace, Jack Higgins, Clancy,

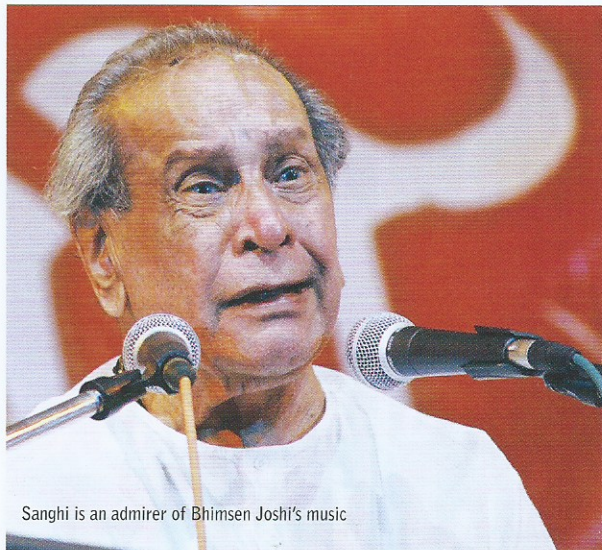
Ayn Rand, Follett, Hailey. In the past decade, Brown, John Grisham, Stieg Larsson, Ian Rankin and countless others were added to my list of favourites. Increasingly, I find that I am reading much more non-fiction than fiction. Some of my favourite non-fiction authors are Gary Zukav, Richard Dawkins and Brian Weiss.

Which are some of the good books by contemporary Indian writers you have read?

Some books by contemporary Indian authors that I have recently read and enjoyed include: Being Mortal—Medicine and What Matters in the End, by Atul Gawande, India After Gandhi, by Ramachandra Guha, Restart, by Mihir Sharma, Editor Unplugged, by Vinod Mehta, Byculla to Bangkok, by Hussain Zaidi and The Sceptical Patriot, by Sidin Vadukut.

They say in today's world being an author is not enough, you have to be an “authorpreneur”. As someone who's known to market his books aggressively and get deeply involved in his book launches, would you agree?





Sanghi is an admirer of Bhimsen Joshi's music

The truth is that nothing sells by itself. I strongly believe that if you are going to spend a couple of years writing a book then you owe it to yourself to spend a few months marketing it. There are 129 million titles in the world. Around 2.2 million titles get added to this universe each year. Around 1.2 million titles have their sales tracked by Nielsen Bookscan each year. The scary part is that of these 1.2 million books, 950,000 titles will sell less than 99 copies in the year. Another 200,000 will sell only around 1,000 copies annually. Only 25,000 titles will sell more than 5,000 units in the year. Just goes to show that lots of people can write books but very few know how to sell them. Superimpose the information that I have just shared with this factoid: the average shopper in a bookstore spends 8 seconds on the front cover and 15 seconds on the back cover. Twenty three seconds is all you have to get the potential customer to decide whether to take it to the cash counter or not! Now do you see why every author must be an authorpreneur?

Are you interested in any of the other arts (like music, painting etc). If so, can you tell us about it and some of your favourite artists?

I love music. In fact, I listen to music while I'm writing. I love Indian Classical, my favourite artistes being Pandit Bhimsen Joshi and Pandit Chhannulal Mishra. I also love Sufi music by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Abida Parveen, Jafar Hussain Khan Badauni and the Wadali brothers.

What's your daily writing regimen like?

I start my day at office rather late, by 11 am. It is possible for me to do that because I am no longer actively involved in my family business. I'm usually at work for 5-6 hours, but I do not attend office on weekends. I usually write in the mornings, from 6am to 10am, which explains why I have to start my day late. My evenings are usually spent reading and researching. I am an introvert by nature and have a close circle of friends whom I meet every few weeks. Other than that, I have virtually no social life. My life revolves around work, writing and my family. And honestly speaking, I like it that way.

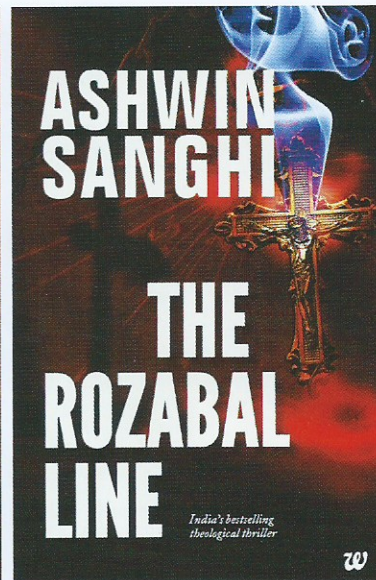
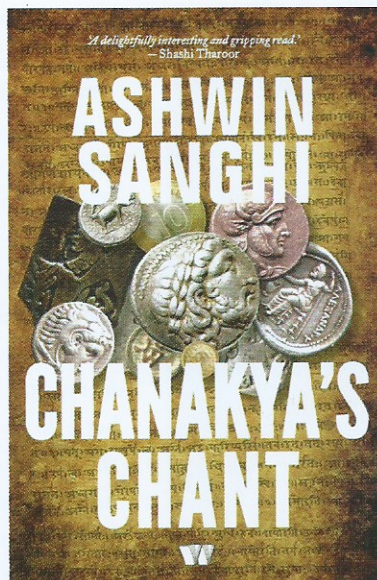
Are you working on any book currently?

I am currently writing my next independent title Sialkot Saga. If all goes well, I hope to release it by end-2015. It is my opportunity to discuss the world of business, finance and economics in the context of Indian history. As you know, I love page-turners and I hope that this one will be precisely that.

Chanakya's Chant is being adapted into film. Are you involved in it? Also when is the movie expected to be out?

The movie rights to Chanakya's Chant have changed hands on more than one occasion hence I have stopped prophesying about the film! To quote from Chanakya's Chant, the protagonist Gangasagar Mishra says "I always avoid prophesying beforehand. It's much better to prophesy after the event has already been ensured." But yes, I am currently working on a screenplay for a movie as well as a television series based on two of my books.

“It was Somerset Maugham who said that there are three rules for writing a novel but no one really knows what they are”



When you look back at your books, do you often feel like changing or improving certain things?

Oh always! That's precisely the reason why I never read my books after they have been published. I always find something that could have been expressed better! One craves for perfection but rarely attains it.

Writing is, as we all know, an arduous thing? Do you often face writers block? How do you keep going?

There is no writer's block that a peg of single malt cannot cure! Seriously speaking, though, I rarely face writer's block. The reason is my organised style of working. I spend several months collating research, then several months developing a plot outline. By the time that I start writing, my job is like that of a child using crayons within a colouring book. With the outlines drawn, how difficult is it to choose which crayon to use?

What are the tips you would offer for someone who is aspiring to be a writer?

One: don't think about being a writer... start writing. Two: don't quit your day job... it could be a while before royalties can sustain you. Three: don't think of yourself as a writer but as a storyteller... words become irrelevant if your story is great. Four: become thick-skinned... rejections and criticism are part of the process of evolving as an author. Five: writers can write stories faster than publishers can write cheques... become an authorpreneur rather than author.

How do you think your writing skills have grown, from the time you self-published your book to now?

It was Somerset Maugham who said that there are three rules for writing a novel but no one really knows what they are. Most people would have you believe that writing is an "art". That's partly true but for the most part, commercial fiction is more about "craft" than "art". I see myself as work-in progress. All that I can hope for is that every new novel from me is a little better than the previous one on account of the fact that I have honed the craft a tad more. •