

History remastered

Snapshots from a scintillating evening with two bestselling ex-Cathedralite novelists.

July 8, 2015: In the chic Café Zoe, ex-Cathedralites eagerly await a meet and greet with two of India's frontrunners in the fiction writing space — Amish Tripathi (*The Immortals of Meluha, Scion of Ikshvaku*) and Ashwin Sanghi (*Chanakya's Chant, The Krishna Key*).

In a masterful display of how effective hosting can contribute to an enterprising venture, Ashwin (AS) charted out an engaging discussion with bestselling author Amish (AT). A carefully prepared repertoire of probing questions, refreshingly open dialogue and a rapt audience made for a great evening. *Excerpts:*

AT: I graduated in Mathematics, the primary reason being that there were no practicals in that, so I had more time for extracurricular activities. After the ICSE exam, my twin brother Ashish and I took our copies of *Julius Caesar* to the kitchen and set fire to them. It was cathartic. I did get marks in English, but I can't say I liked the subject.

AS: Cathedral, IIM, a boring banking job (for 14 years)... one fine day, you decide you want to write. I have a similar story, because I was a *baniya* businessman. What made you realise you didn't want to be in the rat race anymore?

AT: Once a rat, always a rat. It doesn't always have to be an either-or. One can do both. When I started writing, I didn't really wonder where this would go; I didn't even wonder whether it would be published. It was just something I loved.

AS: Where was the germ of the idea?



AT: It began with a conversation with my family. We discovered something interesting on TV. We all know that for Indians, Gods are called Devas and demons are Asuras, but for the Zoroastrian Persians, the pantheon is the opposite. The demons are called Devas and Indra, the King of the Gods among the Indians, is actually one of the chief demons in Zoroastrian Persia. This triggered a discussion — if ancient Indians and ancient Persians had met, would we be calling each other evil? No, because both cultures in ancient times were great and liberal and interacted with each other, learnt from each other. But they were just different. Could it be that there were just different ways of life and they were mature enough

not to look at each other as evil even though their pantheons were different? And if neither was evil, then what is evil? That's where the discussion began; that's how the 'Shiva' trilogy began.

That was the first step — it got converted into an adventure. That was quite a challenge because in school I had never done anything creative at all. I'd never written fiction. I was a lead singer in my band at IIM, but even there, I only sang what someone else created.

AS: That explains you drumming away at book launches these days.

AT: Yes, it's good fun! Anyway, there are these self-help books that claim they can make a writer out of you, so I read them. I was told I should make character sketches, so I did that; I was told I should make a chapter-wise summary, so I made that too. I was told without planning nothing else could happen, so I used Microsoft Excel. I was told to make a date-wise schedule — how many hours I would write.

AS: Was it colour-coded?

AT: It was colour-coded! The daily word target had a red flag if I didn't make it. It was a super flop. When I wrote the story, except for Lord Shiva, nobody seemed to be following their character sketch. From the guys who were good, there were some who started showing disturbing signs of grey. There were guys who were bad who started being quite noble. What helped was advice from my wife. She said: "Don't write with the arrogance of a creator; write with the humility of a witness."

AS: You were an atheist and then you became a *Shiv-bhakt*. Explain that transition.

AT: My grandfather was a pundit and my family is deeply religious. I turned into an atheist in the early '90s. Our city went through a phase of insanity at that time. Most of our college gang in Xavier's thought religion was the cause of all the violence. My dad did try to talk to me, but you know how teenagers are — they don't listen to their parents. My dad used to say there always comes a time in a man's life when he grows up and realises maybe his dad wasn't such an idiot after all. Writing the book kind of brought me slowly back — you can say it was a return to faith. I am naturally a rebellious person. Lord Shiva is my natural God because he is the God of the rebels, he is a rule-breaker, he treats his wife with love and respect, he dances brilliantly and he plays music. One of my younger readers described him as "the dude of the Gods". I had to be brought back to faith and he was the best God to do it.

AS: Religion is about answers that can never be questioned and philosophy is about questions that can never be answered. Are you more of a philosopher or religious believer?

AT: There doesn't have to be a contradiction between the two. In the ancient Vedas, philosophy wasn't a subject that was reduced to the Humanities stream. Philosophy was the first subject that everyone studied. The art of living one's life. The love of wisdom. There is no Sanskrit word for the English word 'blasphemy' because the concept doesn't exist. Faith comes in when you ask questions beyond your understanding and you are troubled by it. Faith gives you peace. Your objective is to keep questioning and pushing the boundaries of your knowledge and reducing the boundaries of your faith and your ultimate destination would be that your knowledge expands to such a degree that you become God; that's *moksh*.

AS: There is a quip by Samuel Johnson that your manuscript is good and original, but the part that is good isn't original and the part that is original isn't good. Tell us about rejection.

AT: I stopped counting after 20. I have been told the Indian publishing industry is fractious. If you put 10 publishers in a room, you will get 11 opinions. But in the case of my manuscript, there was unanimity — every publisher it was sent to hated it. One guy gave me detailed feedback: "Your book is on a religious topic; the main market today is the youth and the main point is that the youth is not interested, so they are not going to buy your book. You have a different take on religion, which means that the older religious people may also not like your books; you may eliminate that segment as well." There was a third segment — the literati, the guys who love British Raj-era English. But I write in modern Indian English. So he told me: "You alienated that segment as well. Who are you trying to sell to?" I told him I didn't do market research before writing the book, I just wrote it! In some ways, I am the better for it. For me, the story was essentially a philosophy I wanted to convey. I think

there was a positive impact in terms of the marketing side, because I finally self-published the book. And the fact that no mainstream publisher was backing it ended up being a blessing in disguise. I didn't have any publisher telling me, "We can't do this because the industry has never tried something like this before." We did a lot of innovative things, which have never been tried before in the publishing industry and which worked well for us. For example, the trailer.

AS: This great marketing eventually resulted in the fastest selling series in Indian publishing and if I look at that number, it's 2.5 million plus and growing. When you got down to writing the Ram Chandra series, were you scared? Sometimes, success creates its own fear.

AT: When I am writing, I don't really think about what anyone else thinks. I write for myself, what feels right to me. I'm on very good terms with my former boss and I told him if the book goes south, I'll come back to him. But yes, when the book is over and the marketing phase starts, then I get nervous.

~ Compiled by Sundeep Goswami
(ISC 2011)



Amish Tripathi (Class of 1990) is most recently the author of *Scion of Ikshvaku*, the first in his Ram Chandra series. *The Immortals of Meluha*, the first book of the 'Shiva' trilogy, is a No. 1 national bestseller.

Ashwin Sanghi (Class of 1985) wrote his first book, *The Rozabal Line*, under the pseudonym Shawn Haigins, an anagram of his full name. In 2014, he collaborated with James Patterson to write *Private India*.