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# BRU CH

ASHWIN SANGHI

## MASTER OF MYSTERY

HE WRITES FACING EAST, EMAILS HIMSELF, AND NAMES  
CHARACTERS IN HIS BOOKS IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER...  
WHAT MAKES INDIA'S BESTSELLING STORYTELLER TICK?

  
=MasterOfMystery





Make-up and hair by  
Ashwin Shelar

Ashwin wears a shirt from Thin Red Line, jacket  
from Raymond, trousers from  
Rochester Clothing, shoes from Florsheim and  
watch from Raymond Weil



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# ASHWIN SANGHI'S YARNS

**BY WEAVING COMPLEX PLOTS, MYTHOLOGY AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES, THIS AUTHOR HAS HIS READERS HOOKED. EVEN SO, IS IT RIGHT TO CALL HIM THE DAN BROWN OF INDIA?**

Text by Mignonne Dsouza

Photos shot exclusively for *HT Brunch* by Prabhat Shetty

**“I** am not much of a writer, but I am a good storyteller.”

Author Ashwin Sanghi admits he's learning his craft on the job, but his complex plots, mythology mash-ups and conspiracy theories have readers hooked.

“The ending of a book should be like a good burp at the end of a heavy meal,” says master tale-spinner Ashwin Sanghi, explaining just what he aims for when he crafts his conspiracy fiction novels that weave history, theology, mythology, popular culture, science and philosophy into one action-packed read.

His latest, *Keepers of the Kalachakra*, which will release this January at the Jaipur Literature Festival, has it all: political characters that remind you of real-life politicians, a racy, complex plot and enough improbable twists to keep you hooked.

It's a worthy successor to his previous bestsellers: *The Rozabal Line*, *Chankaya's Chant*, *The Krishna Key* and *The Sialkot Saga*, collectively known as the Bharat series, in which Sanghi explored such themes as the lost years of Jesus Christ, placed Chanakya and the Kalki avatar of Vishnu in a modern context, and crafted a Kane and Abel-esque saga that leads from Partition to the present day.

Sanghi also co-authors the

**“MY READERS SHOULD NEVER HAVE TO MAKE AN EFFORT TO TURN THE PAGE; THEY SHOULD BE COMPELLED TO DO SO”**

Private crime thriller series with James Patterson (*Private India* and *Private Delhi* are out; the next thriller will be set in Bengaluru), featuring detective Santosh Wagh.

But how does Sanghi come up with these plots, and how does he keep it all straight in his head?

## BEHIND THE PAGE

“I never get tired of asking ‘What if,’” says Sanghi. Over the years, he's made use of various methods to “avoid tying himself up in knots”. When he was writing *Chanakya's Chant*, it was index cards. By the time of *The Krishna Key*, it was Excel spreadsheets; currently Sanghi uses a word processing programme called Scrivener, which allows him to create index cards online and associate it with a chapter. He's also part of an

effort to create the ultimate writing programme, in association with Vikram Chandra, a writing software that will build a certain amount of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the writing process and “eliminate flaws in the flow.”

Sanghi composes each book in

## HOW DOES ASHWIN SANGHI NAME HIS MANY CHARACTERS? HERE'S HIS 3-STEP PROCESS

- I keep them as different as possible, so I don't have a Meena and a Meenal in the same novel.
- I go alphabetically, so after thinking of a name starting with A, I move on to B and so on.
- I don't choose names that are tongue-twisters.



his 'sacred space' – a windowless basement study, where he sits with a wall of books to the back and left of him, facing a blank wall that holds a whiteboard on which he may sometimes draw a visual flow chart.

"The whole process needs to be quite methodical," explains Sanghi. The first stage is research, when Sanghi does a lot of generalised reading. *Keepers of the Kalachakra*, for instance, lists 58 books that readers can move on to for deeper understanding, from *Sri Yantra – The Ancient Instrument to Control the Psychophysiological State of Man* to *The Golden Age of Indian Mathematics*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and *Spies in the Himalayas*. "Unless I am open to reading a ton of books, I cannot draw on connections and take creative liberties," says Sanghi. "Ultimately the book has to be so interesting that readers should never have to make an effort to turn the page; they should be compelled to do so."

Next, Sanghi creates a detailed plot outline. "For one of the books in the Private series, the outline was 10,000 words, while the book was 75,000 words," explains Sanghi. The last stage is actually writing the book, which "is the easiest part, like filling in a colouring book," says Sanghi. "I don't understand when people ask me if I get writer's block. Because I've been through the entire exercise, I never get stuck at this point."

## THE MULTITASKER

Sanghi's days unfold in a predictable pattern. "I don't have a 9 to 5 job, I have a 5 to 9 job," he says. "I usually write early morning, from 5am to

**"I DON'T JUST WANT TO BE KNOWN AS A WRITER OF HISTORICAL FICTION OR MYTHOLOGICAL MYSTERIES"**



## 5 THINGS YOU DID NOT KNOW ABOUT ASHWIN SANGHI

➤ He always writes facing east, as he associates east with the creative spirit, which comes from the sunrise.

➤ After his daily writing session (5am to 9am), he drinks a cup of tea with his father every day.

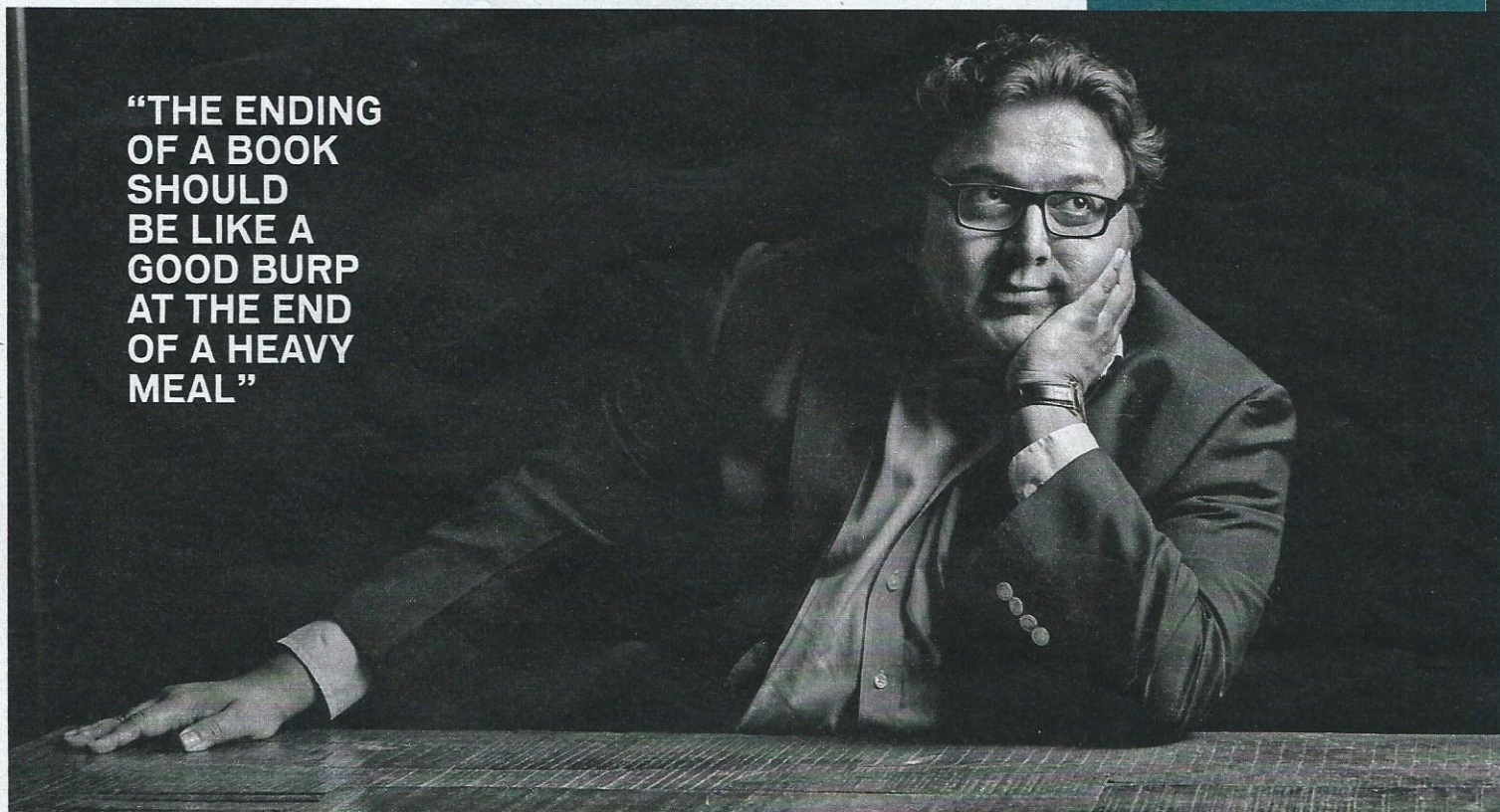
➤ He has an email account from 2005 that serves as his virtual journal. Sanghi has sent himself around 12,000 emails to date.

➤ He keeps an unending to-do list on his phone.

➤ As a boy, his grandfather sent him a novel every week from his own library in Kanpur. Ashwin was required to read it and write him a letter telling him what he thought about it.



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9am, in my study. Then, because I am still associated with the family business (M K Sanghi Group, Motors), I go in to work for three to four hours, from noon to around 4pm, five days a week. After getting back home, I spend time with my family, and by 7pm, I'm back in the study to do my reading and research. I don't really have a social life, I just occasionally meet close friends, my school and college buddies."

He is fiercely disciplined when it comes to his writing. "I've been multitasking for years now; I started working at my dad's business when I was 12, and always managed both my studies and work. Today, even if I am jet-lagged, I still get up at 5am to write," he says.

Sanghi has developed an 'ecosystem' made up of trusted people to work with. "I have two youngsters who assist me with research, a Sanskrit expert, a cover design guy, someone to manage my social media, schedule my speaking engagements, load events into my Google calendar and plan my travels."

The ecosystem also includes Sanghi's aunt, Aparna Gupta, who always reads his first draft. "She's not a regular critic and is not polite," laughs Sanghi. "The other person I can rely on is my publisher Gautam Padmanabhan, who looks at the book like a commissioning

editor, and tells me if the story works or not."

Sanghi has come a long way since his first book, which required four edits. Even now, he doesn't think of himself as a writer.

"I have taught myself to be a writer as I have written my books, but it has been the greatest learning experience. Dan Brown's books are explained so beautifully, a mix of history, theology and philosophy, presented in the form of questions and clues, plus the side narratives, that they are a delicious reading experience. That's what I have ventured to do. But I'm realistic enough to know that I will always be a work in progress. My best book is always my last one, because it was five per cent better than the previous book. But though I may not be much of a writer, I am a good storyteller."

## **TALES FROM HERE AND THERE**

There are still many conspiracy theories out there for Sanghi to pursue. "The Jesus story was the first one to catch my attention," says Sanghi. "And I'm fascinated by whether the events related in Indian mythology are based on real people. I find the interplay between science and mythology very fascinating."

A more modern tale that intrigues Sanghi is that of the

events surrounding the death of Netaji Subash Chandra Bose. "I'd love to give that a fictional bent," he says.

While the Bharat series books are long-term projects, spanning from two to two-and-a-half years, the Private series take six months to a year to be published. Sanghi is also a self-help author, with his 13 Steps series, with three published books to date (*13 Steps to Bloody Good Luck*, *Good Wealth* and *Good Marks*), which takes him one to three months after the first draft is submitted by his co-author. Why would he even venture into other categories of writing?

"Even though each of the books in the Bharat series is different, I find it worrying to be boxed in," he says. "I don't just want to be known as the writer of historical fiction or mythological mysteries. Your creativity then ends within those boundaries. Also, taking a break from a story and coming back to it enables me to question myself and see if the idea holds interest or not."

Ultimately, if one conspiracy theory does not pan out, Sanghi will always have another. "Karmically, I know this is not my last life," he says, "Maybe then I'll be able to tell all the stories. Ultimately, I want to die telling a story."

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## **QUICK QS WITH A**

### **The last book you read?**

*The Gene: An Intimate History* by Siddhartha Mukherjee.

### **The shows you love?**

*Game of Thrones*, *House of Cards*, *Narcos*, British and Nordic crime thrillers like *The Killing*, *The Bridge* and *Broadchurch*.

### **The book you wish you wrote?**

*Midnight's Children*.

### **The book of yours should be turned into a movie?**

*Chanakya's Chant*.

### **Who should star in it?**

Someone earthy like Ajay Devgn, Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Manoj Bajpayee or Irrfan Khan.

### **Who should play you in a biopic?**

Rishi Kapoor.