



on

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ON A HISTORY HIGH

A t2oS chat
with author
**Ashwin
Sanghi** *p4-5*



IN THE
MOOD FOR
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COVERSTORY

One of the best authors of mythological fiction in India, Ashwin Sanghi was happy running a business with no intention of ever getting into writing. However, stumbling upon a shrine in Srinagar got him hooked to the history behind it and *The Rozabal Line* was born. Mixing history with mythology, he gave us three bestsellers back to back and was hailed to be the Dan Brown of India. Soon the Bharat series and a venture into non-fiction with the *13 Steps* series followed. Needless to say, they all managed to appeal to his audience as he expanded his fanbase at breakneck speed. He has even co-authored with James Patterson for the *Private* series. Earlier this year, he gave us *The Vault of Vishnu*, a part of the *Bharat* series. **120S** caught the author in the middle of the lockdown to talk about all things mythology, over email. Excerpts...



From a career in business, what was the driving factor behind writing fiction novels?
My maternal grandfather was a voracious reader and poet who would send me a book each week to read. At the end of the week, I had to send him a one-page letter about why I liked or disliked it. Up until 2005, I remained a voracious reader without having any idea that there was a writer lurking inside of me. In that year I visited Rozabal, a shrine in the heart of Srinagar, which carries the legend that the person buried there is none other than Jesus Christ himself. I was fascinated by the story and began reading and researching everything that I could lay my hands on. Twelve months and 67 books later, I had multiple theories swimming in my head. My wife casually suggested that I should try weaving the disparate threads into a single cohesive whole and that gentle nudge got me started on writing my first book, *The Rozabal Line*.

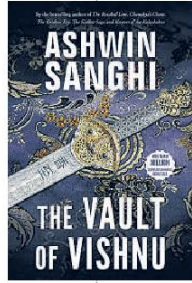
And from where was the idea of writing self-help books born?
At a literary festival in Chennai, a young lady asked me,

"What are the factors that contributed to your success as an author?" I narrated a story to her about how almost every publisher and literary agent had turned down my work. Frustrated, I had described my situation to a close family friend and he told me, "In life, 99 per cent is about good luck! Just remember that, son." In a slightly argumentative tone I had asked him, "But uncle, what about the balance one per cent? Surely that must be hard work or talent?" Laughing loudly, he had declared, "The final one per cent? That's called bloody good luck, my boy! Simply keep at it and wait for your bloody good luck to kick in!" That conversation was the genesis of the first book in the self-help series, *13 Steps to Bloody Good Luck*. This was followed by books on wealth, health, marks and parenting.

Of everything you have written, what do you enjoy the most?
I love topics such as history, philosophy, science, mythology, politics, theology, anthropology, business, crime, geography, game theory and psychology. Most of my Bharat series books have one or more of these elements in them. When I sit down to write a Bharat series book, I lose myself in the project for around two years. So yes, the *Bharat* series is my first love. I have published six books in the collection — *The Rozabal Line*, *Chanakya's Chant*, *The Krishna Key*, *The Shakti Saga*, *Keepers of the Kalachakra* and *The Vault of Vishnu*.

What is the research process like for both your fiction and self-help series?
I spend several months on research. For a typical Bharat series book, this could be six to 12 months. The nature of the research

varies according to the book. For example, *Chanakya's Chant* simply involved multiple readings of the *Arthashastra* and the *Mauryan* texts. *The Krishna Key* involved travel to Mathura, Dwarka, Somnath etc. *The Shakti Saga* involved interviewing people who had lived in Calcutta and Bombay of the Fifties and Sixties. *Keepers of the Kalachakra* involved teaching myself quantum theory. I then spend around three months on the plot. The plot will usually have every twist and turn in the story planned chapter-wise. It is only after these two stages that I start writing. Detailed plotting ensures that I do not allow the pace to slacken except of my own choosing. I am not a great writer but I am a decent rewriter, so I rewrite the manuscript several times before it goes in for editing. All in all, two years is the average from beginning to end.



My crime thrillers — I wrote two bestsellers with James Patterson: *Private India* and *Private Delhi* — and my self-help books require far less time because they are less research-oriented. Plus, with the latter, there is always a co-author who brings the domain knowledge.
Being one of the frontrunners of mythological fiction in India, how do you set yourself apart from your contemporaries?
I don't need to because each one is doing very different things. Devdutt Pattanaik simplifies mythology to make it understandable to the layperson. Amish Tripathi retells the myths much like the tradition of 300 versions of the *Ramayana*. Anand Neelakantan retells narratives from the point of view of the vanquished. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni tells the stories from a female perspective. So each one has a niche. My niche is to find the overlap between history and mythology. Remember, Myth + History = Mystery.

Mythology, self-help, crime thriller — Ashwin Sanghi dabbles in a myriad genres, but his heart lies in blending myth with history, finds out Shrestha Saha

Where do you draw inspiration from for your fiction novels?
I have maintained an 'idea bank' for the past decade. It is actually simply a dedicated email account. If I read an interesting article on the web, I email the link to my bank. If I see something of interest I take a pic and email it to my idea bank. If I read something interesting, I take a pic of the page that interests me and email it. As of date, I have around 15,000 emails in the bank. That's more than enough material to last me a lifetime.

Tell us about your latest release, *The Vault of Vishnu* — from inception to execution.
I was having a cup of tea from a roadside vendor and it was delicious because of the extra sugar. It struck me that we call 'sugar' by the name 'chini' meaning 'from China'. In fact, even our word for tea, 'chai' is from China. Later on, I found out that the first Chinese immigrant to Bengal in the late 18th century was someone called Tong Achew who had established a sugarcane plantation and a sugar refinery in a region that continued to be called Achipur thereafter. Hence the term 'chini' for sugar. Famously enough, I found that when the Chinese traveller Xuanzang had visited India 11 centuries earlier, he had been very excited to 'discover' sugar and candies and took some back for the emperor. This meant that sugar had travelled from India to China and back again! I wondered how many such ideas went back and forth. The obvious one is Buddhism but there was also an incredible exchange that happened in diverse fields such as silk weaving, meditation and martial arts. That's when I decided that a book that covered these two civilisations and the exchange between them would be exciting.

As is my usual pattern, I invested almost a year in my research: reading books, articles and papers that would enable me to build the historical narrative around this ancient relationship. But once I was done, I knew that the final part of my research would be to visit the key places that figured in my story. I had never been to China before. It felt slightly intimidating. My itinerary was not determined by tourist cities but by specific locations that were part of my book's narrative, places such as the Terracotta Army, the Wild Goose Pagoda, the White Horse

Temple and the Shaolin Temple. The research was more difficult than usual because of the China dimension. Ask me to weave a story around an Indian idea and the process is almost automatic. Coping with the challenges of an alien culture was far more challenging. As it turns out, my timing was spot-on. Had this book been written a year later, the project would have been stalled given the challenges of Covid-19.

Batang La, Glimochi, Doglang, Buzhang, Shazhou — what kind of research and imagination goes into the naming process in your works of fiction?
Many names are 'given', they are simply existing part of the narrative. When it comes to fictional characters, I try choosing names that are easy to say aloud. For example, in *The Vault of Vishnu*, our protagonist is a young lady called Paranjit Khurana but her friends call her Pam. So that becomes easy for anyone to read. *The Vault of Vishnu* was particularly difficult because of the place names. The journey of Xuanzang from China to India and back covered many places and I wanted the current names as well as the ancient names to be part of the narrative. I had to look at multiple sources to determine which names to use and which ones to keep out.

For someone who has intensely studied history and ancient India, what are some of the lessons that we can imbibe in our current political scenario?
After I finished writing *Chanakya's Chant*, I realised that too much attention seems to be given to the political machinations of Chanakya whereas insufficient attention is paid to the fact that his seminal work, the *Arthashastra*, was mostly about good governance. I was absolutely amazed to find that the *Arthashastra* even specifies how grain should be stored, how a treasury should be constructed, the ideal form of taxation, maintenance of law and order, the preferred width of a carriage road, and virtually every aspect of sensible government policy. It's unfortunate to see that what plagues India today is simply a fundamental lack of governance.

Even as a conspiracy fiction writer I could not have conjured up a crazier scenario than this one. Most of the world is in lockdown and nature is showing that it is way more powerful than any of us. I believe that this is a turning point for the world and the human race.... I sincerely hope that even if and when this blows over, we will not go back to 'normal'... I sincerely hope that lessons will be learnt and that the new normal will be different from the normal that we are used to

I think the lesson for all of us is that we need to pay more attention to Chanakya's lessons in governance rather than his lessons on realpolitik.

Do you have an audience in mind when you set out to write a particular book?
Not for specific books but for genres. My Bharat series reader is versatile and is equally fascinated by topics such as mythology, history and philosophy. The age demography is wide from 16 to 90. But for crime thrillers, I am writing for a younger audience, usually in the West. My self-help books have a strong student readership.

What is your day like, with lockdown and without it? Are you writing or reading more now?
I continue to be up at five every morning to write. Those three-four 'golden hours' are precious irrespective of lockdown or not. The next few hours are family time and personal fitness routine. I get back to the world of books in the afternoon, usually getting into research for two three parallel projects that are presently on my plate. Owing to the lockdown, many of my travel engagements and public events have got cancelled. Many of them are now being held online using video conferencing platforms, so I do a couple of those each week.

One contemporary author who you love reading and why...
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. I loved both *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*. I think that Chitra injects freshness into these narratives. Over the ages, stories such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have had a distinctly male bias. I think that Chitra is doing an amazing job in setting that right.

As a businessman, thought leader and author, how do you think the world will emerge from this catastrophe?
Even as a conspiracy fiction writer I could not have conjured up a crazier scenario than this one. Most of the world is in lockdown and nature is showing that it is way more powerful than any of us. I believe that this is a turning point for the world and the human race. I sincerely hope that even if and when this blows over, we will not go back to 'normal'. Normal means that we can pollute the way we want, we can eat the way we want, we can exploit mother earth the way we want. I sincerely hope that lessons will be learnt and that the new normal will be different from the normal that we are used to. We desperately need to change the way we think and act. In Bhutan, the monarch was famous for coining the term GNH (Gross National Happiness) in place of GDP (Gross Domestic Product). The world needs to orient itself towards GNH rather than GDP.

What can we expect next from your table?
I am presently writing the first season of a web series that I hope to co-produce. In addition, I am writing a show that has a historical twist. I am also working on the research for my seventh book in the Bharat series that I hope to bring out by 2022.

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