



OPINION



The Magicians of Mazda: Absorbing thriller with immense history lessons about Parsis

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Ratan Sharda | June 05, 2022 20:49:16 IST



The Magicians of Mazda: Absorbing thriller with immense history lessons about Parsis

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Ashwin Sanghi has an extraordinary talent for bringing ancient wisdom alive with his thorough research, then whipping up a fast-paced thriller by blending facts with fiction. In his latest offering too, he doesn't disappoint.

The most interesting and surprising is his choice of the Zoroastrian religion and its followers as the central theme of this thriller. Were it written by a Parsi, it might have been easier. But, for a Sanatani to take up this challenge is a tribute to his readiness to dive into unknown waters. One comes to know about one of the oldest religions

his readiness to dive into unknown waters. One comes to know about one of the oldest religions of the world and its followers who have suffered worse persecution, genocide, and atrocities. After reading the book, one might wonder if they suffered more than many other races and communities. Only a few Parsis are left to tell their tale.

Hardly any Parsi is left in the land of her origin, Persia or Iran as it is known today. Not much is known about this great religion due to its antiquity and the nature of Parsis who treat their religion as an intensely private affair. They, like Hindus, haven't cared to tell the world about their history of sustained persecution and holocaust. They have been with us for centuries and have contributed immensely to the progress of this nation much beyond their numbers. We lionise them but we don't know them in a real sense.

Ashwin Sanghi fills up this huge gap in our knowledge and helps us understand their legacy. Being a total outsider, one is wonderstruck by the humongous and honest effort put in by him. I might say, it is an Indian's tribute to his brethren who came all the way to escape their persecution. They not only became one with their land of adoption but also enriched it.

It is not a good idea to reveal the plot of a thriller. But, to give you a bare idea; the chief protagonist is the keeper of a relic that is as old as the Zoroastrian religion itself as he belongs to a priestly class of the community. He doesn't know its importance till the intelligence networks from various countries come after him. He is a prodigious scientist who has created a wonder drug, so a pharma MNC is after him to get the details. Soon others are after him as they too smell the scent of the trail. So, for him it is a double whammy. He passes through a nightmarish situation, helped along by her devoted non-Parsi scholar wife who is a researcher of history. In this book the scenario shifts to Ayatollah's Iran with strings being pulled from across the globe till the hero is finally flown out of hell with the help of Mossad and RAW. On the way, there are masters of espionage, unpredictable twists and turns and double-crosses — a hallmark of Sanghi's writings.

For a change, this thriller flows a little easier as compared to the wild roller coaster ride of *The Rosabell Line* or *The Vault of Vishnu*. He delves deeper into the philosophical and historical side of storytelling here. The build-up to understanding the significance of Zoroastrian teachings, the horror faced by the Parsi community, exodus of a small number of Parsis

understanding the significance of Zoroastrian teachings, the horror faced by the Parsi community, exodus of a small number of Parsis to Bharat, repeat of the horrors they faced in their motherland due to renewed attack by Islamist zealot on them in Gujarat till the peaceful settlement, their hard-earned success, the hell faced by their brethren in Iran over centuries after having ruled a huge empire for nearly 400 years — all this is brought out vividly by the master storyteller.

It is worth every page that you turn over, to learn about them. One can't help but note that just as Kashmiri Hindus had a brief 140 years of peace during Raja Ranjit Singh and Dogra rulers in Jammu and Kashmir after centuries of persecution, Parsis too enjoyed the spring of Pahlavi rule in Iran for a few decades. But, alas, both thought that spring would last; it didn't.

The piece de resistance comes in the last section as the author exploits his key strength of finding the common threads between Zoroastrian and Vedic texts and challenges us with his conclusions. Similarity between the ancient Avestan language and Sanskrit is brought alive by the dextrous pen of the author, and one is wonderstruck.

In one place, a character notes, "It is fashionable these days to ignore history in order to preserve the peace between faiths. And I am

In one place, a character notes, "It is fashionable these days to ignore history in order to preserve the peace between faiths. And I am all for peace and interfaith understanding. But, that process must start with recognising what happened. Forced conversions did happen, and destruction of Zoroastrian places of worship did happen. Redeployment of fire temples as mosques did happen. Identification of Zoroastrians as a polluted being, najiz, did happen.... Compulsory humiliation of those paying jizya did happen."

Sounds ominously familiar. Lessons of history need to be learnt by all civil societies or they are in danger of being run over by uncivil brute forces, as it happened during the medieval period.

American historian Will Durant had aptly said, "The Islamic conquest of India is probably the bloodiest story in history. It is a discouraging tale, for its evident moral is that civilisation is a precious good, whose delicate complex of order and freedom, culture and peace, can at any moment be overthrown by barbarians invading from without or multiplying within." He might as well have been speaking about the Zoroastrian nation of Parsis.

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from without or multiplying within. He might as well have been speaking about the Zoroastrian nation of Parsis.

This book is worth reading because it will enrich us with the history and philosophy of a great community on the verge of extinction but that deserves to live long for the sake of humanity. It is an absorbing thriller that has lessons for the current generation too. For, history repeats itself if we don't learn from it.

*The reviewer is a well-known author and writer.
Views expressed are personal.*

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