

The Magicians of Mazda: Interview with author Ashwin Sanghi



**By Kainaz Jussawalla,
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Ashwin Sanghi is an author who needs no introduction. With countless bestsellers under his belt, he is one of the most sought after mythological fiction writers of today.

'The Magicians of Mazda', published by Harper Collins India and releasing on May 21, is Ashwin Sanghi's new historical thriller and the seventh in his 'Bharat Series'.

The book begins with a fleet of boats docking at the port of Sanjan in 720 CE, carrying 18,000 frightened souls fleeing the cruelty of Iran's Umayyad Caliphate, all looking for a new home.

As the author dives deep into the origins of Parsis and the Zoroastrian religion in India and weaves fact into fiction, adventure and thrill, he presents a story that leaves readers at the edge of their seats.

It all begins with Jim, a Parsi scientist, who is abducted from his lab in Seattle by Ayatollah who believes that Jim is the key to uncover the ancient relic known as the 'Athraavan Star.' And they will do anything to obtain it.

From the ancient ruins of Persepolis to the Taliban camps in Afghanistan; from the Udvada fire temple to the icy mountains of Tehran... the exciting and dangerous adventures in this exhilaratingly fast paced novel never stop.

Intrigued and delighted that there was finally a Parsi-Zoroastrian mythological thriller, I knew I had to find out more about the author and this one-of-a-kind book. And so I did...

What was the prime thought behind writing 'The Magicians of Mazda' — a grand Parsi mythological novel, something that has never been done before?

Ashwin Sanghi: Each of my thrillers in the 'Bharat Series' is an exploration of what I see as 'overlaps' — those between history and myth, between philosophy and science, between politics and culture... The very first book in the series, 'The Rozabal Line', explored the



overlaps between Christian theology and Buddhism. 'Keepers of the Kalachakra' was an exploration of the overlap between Vedanta and Quantum Theory. Over the years, I have been absolutely fascinated by the overlaps between Zoroastrian and Vedic elements. The Avesta reveres the cow and sacred fire, while deities like Varuna and Mitra are respected not only in the Zoroastrian Gathas but also in the Rigveda. Zoroastrian yasnas are similar to Vedic yajnas and the overlap between Avestan verses and Vedic Sanskrit is incredible. While Zoroastrians texts refer to Daevas and Ahura, Hindus also refer to the same but in a slightly different sense. We may think that the Parsis came to Sanjan in 720 CE, but the contact between Zoroastrians and India goes back much further. Gujarat lay along the maritime routes used by Zoroastrian sailors from Persia. Even the Mahabharata uses the term 'Parasika' to refer to the people who inhabited the regions west of the Indus. I wanted to explore those ancient connections through the format of a fast-paced and entertaining suspense thriller and that's how 'The Magicians of Mazda' was conceived.

Please tell our readers about the kind of extensive research that has gone into this book?

Ashwin Sanghi: "I started with the Qissa-i-Sanjan but then quickly went into allied tomes. For example there is an excellent book, 'Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices' by Mary Boyce and another one about the Zoroastrian flame by Alan Williams. I was particularly interested in the 'magi' and delved into 'The Rituals & Initiations of the Persian Magi' by Stephen Flowers. The philosopher depicted in Friedrich Nietzsche's work 'Thus Spake Zarathustra'

had very little influence on my novel's backdrop but I read the work nonetheless. There were far more valuable insights to be had in 'The Religious Ceremonies & Customs of the Parsees' by Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, 'Parsis of Ancient India' by Shapurji Kavasji Hodi-vala and 'Zarathustra' by Ardeshir Mehta. But please understand, all my research was only directed at building a plausible story for my thriller narrative. This is not a serious, academic, non-fiction tome exploring Zoroastrian theology, Parsi customs or Persian history. My focus is to entertain through fiction, rather than educate through facts.

Did you have Parsi friends who gave you insights?

Ashwin Sanghi: I was born and brought up in Mumbai and attended the Cathedral & John Connon School. It was impossible to not have Parsi friends. My closest friend during my college years was racing enthusiast and foodie Yohann Sethna. During my business years, Hormazd Sorabjee and I had lots to share about cars. Funnily enough, I never understood the importance of names like Cyrus, Jamshed, Hormazd, Darius, Navroze, Ardeshir or Xerxes until I started researching this book. It was a regular feature to attend navjotes and weddings of Parsi friends and partake of raspberry soda, patra-ni-machhi and lagan-nu-custard. In later years I realized that my best lawyer friends were Parsi, my best doctor friends were Parsi and even my best income tax consultants were Parsi. It is truly remarkable what an oversized influence the miniscule Parsi community has had on India. In my book there is a line which says, "It was claimed, with some justification, that Bombay was the city which by God's assistance was intended

to be built. True, Bombay would need God. But, more importantly, it would need the Parsis."

Were there any surprising facts about the Parsis you came across?

Ashwin Sanghi: Oh, there were many. For example, the "three wise kings" who attended Jesus at his birth were probably Zoroastrian magi. I find it fascinating that the root of the word "magician" lies in the word "magi". But I find it equally fascinating that what is celebrated as Nowruz by the Zoroastrians is celebrated as Navreh by the Kashmiri Pandits. And while Parsis wear the sudreh, Kashmiri pandits wear the sadr. The overlaps are simply overwhelming. Take, for instance, the words "tam amavantam yajatam" in Sanskrit. In Avestan, they are rendered as "tem amavantem yazatem". But both phrases mean the same thing—"the powerful God". In ancient Iran, fire was deified as "Athar". Athar's role was mainly that of an intermediary between heaven and earth. And in India one sees the birth of the Atharva Veda! How amazing is that?

Any Parsis that you are fond of?

Ashwin Sanghi: Too many to mention. JRD Tata was an example we all looked up to but the story of Jamsetji Tata and his struggle to set up a steel plant was even more fascinating. The caterpillar-to-butterfly story of Freddie Mercury, the jovial exuberance of Bejan Daruwalla, the stoic determination of Sam Maneckshaw, the incredible musical talent of Zubin Mehta, the intellect of Nani Palkhivala, the sheer brilliance of Homi Bhabha, the shipping empire of Jamshedji Jeejeebhoy and the political acumen of Dadabhai Naoroji... But there are so many Parsis that are not known to the general public. For example, Dorabji Nanabhoy's son raised a militia to protect Bombay from Mughal raids; another early Parsi inhabitant was Kharshedji Ponchajee Panday, who supplied materials for building the city's fortifications. Lowjee Wadia was a master builder who was brought to Bombay in 1736 to build Bombay's dockyard. I was able to read

their fascinating stories while putting together my book. I have always believed that the journey is more important than the destination and I loved the journey I undertook to write this book.

How did the idea of this book emerge?

Ashwin Sanghi: The thriller maestro, Dan Brown, was here in Mumbai in 2014. After the first day when I was in conversation with him at the NCPA, he requested I take him to a few places I considered "interesting" in Mumbai. Among the 4-5 places that I took him to was the Tower of Silence at Malabar Hill. Of course, we could not go near the dakhmas but a few priests were happy to show us the scale model of the area and explain how the process worked. That visit was when the idea of a Zoroastrian mystery developed in my head. Some years later on a visit to Diu, I was able to meet a Parsi tourist who was able to explain to me first-hand the workings of a Tower of Silence because Diu's dakhma had been deconsecrated. Some months later, I was on a flight from Delhi to Mumbai and Boman Irani was seated next to me. We got talking about his films and my books and by the time I disembarked, I had made up my mind that I would locate a copy of the Qissa-i-Sanjan. I visited Surat, Udvada and Navsari over the years but not Sanjan.

One of the senior employees in my father's business was familiar with Udvada and I asked him for his input on places to visit. He told me about Kolhaji's double-lemon soda and the nankhatai biscuits from Bharat Bakery. You will see references to these in the story and I have provided a substantive description of the Iranshah Atash Behram too.

