

Filling the Gaps in History

Ashwin Sanghi shifts to politics in his latest novel

By JAYANT SRIRAM

Since he wrote *The Rozabal Line*, a book that explores the last years of Jesus Christ and a theory that he may have travelled to India, businessman-turned-writer Ashwin Sanghi has often been seen as an Indian competitor to Dan Brown. It's a title that does not sit lightly with its holder and Sanghi seems both bewildered and resigned when it comes up.

"*Rozabal* (2006) is nothing like *The Da Vinci Code*, but I tend to get clubbed with that. I wouldn't want to be a desi Dan Brown because it establishes an expectancy in my readers that every book will be a theological thriller. That's not where I'm coming from."

Sanghi says he wants to explore different topics, though a couple of things will remain common.

One: elements of mystery and conspiracy. "I need that to get my adrenaline pumping. I'm a businessman by day and any book I write requires at least six to eight months of research. So, if the topic doesn't hold my interest, I may abandon the project midway." Secondly, it "has to involve the ancient, because that's essential to my DNA".

Rather than write historical fiction then, Sanghi is more interested in the way history relates to the present, and in turning that equation into a page-turner. *The Rozabal Line*, for instance, is not all abstract history—the narrative continually shifts to the present day to incorporate elements as diverse as the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Opus Dei.

The book's success has ensured that Sanghi's second effort, *Chanakya's Chant* was both much-awaited and well-received. It currently tops the bestseller list.

It was by 2009 summer that Sanghi started looking for a new topic. That time, UPA II was coming in to power in Delhi and a tug of war was going on for Cabinet berths. "That's when I decided I want my next book to be 180 degrees away from religion—and set in politics."

Chanakya's Chant is based on two parallel constructs: a historical story on the political machinations of Kautilya in establishing Chandragupta Maurya as emperor, and a contemporary thread where a history teacher in UP is struggling to find a protege whom he will guide to become the prime minister. "I like to write in those areas where there are gaps in history."

