

# For Old Times' Sake

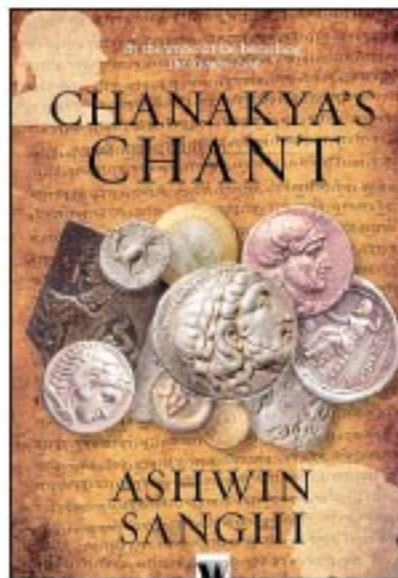
Commercial fiction in India falls back on history and mythology to spin a gripping tale

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SOME years ago, Chetan Bhagat did the unthinkable: he made young and restless Indians read his tales of urban India in conversational English. Soon, Indians were craving for stories of the country by home-grown authors. This need is now being met by writers who are giving Indian history and mythology a contemporary twist. The result has

been rewarding — Ashwin Sanghi's *Chanakya's Chant*, Anish Sarkar's *Benaami*, and *The Immortals of Meluha* by Amish rule the bestseller lists.

Though authors such as Devdutt Pattanaik, Ashok Banker and William Dalrymple have retold stories from Indian mythology and history, the trend of using these for commercial fiction seems to be a recent one. Sanghi believes that these stories establish an immediate connection



with the readers and make for gripping backdrops. "The initial hook for a commercial fiction paperback in this genre must necessarily come from the ancient. Once the reader is



hooked, then it does not matter if the story is history-oriented or not," he says.

When Sarkar wanted to write a thriller with a historical thread running parallel to a

modern-day plot, he revisited the mutiny of 1857. "The mutiny was a momentous event in our history, full of legend and intrigue and yet there is not enough literature and

Anish Sarkar with his book, *Benaami* (left); the cover of Ashwin Sanghi's *Chanakya's Chant*

little or no fiction around it," he says.

The present political situation made Sanghi wonder if Indian politics was always so messy. His exploration of past politics resulted in two parallel stories — one of Chanakya 2,300 years ago, and the other of Pandit Gangasagar Mishra in the present day — in *Chanakya's Chant*. "The present day story is entirely fictional. Many of the political strategies and characters, however, are drawn from real life events," he says.