

# 'I have this fanciful imagination partly because I lead such a boring life in my work avatar'



SUMITRO'14.

If you are hot on crime thrillers, you'll know of James Patterson. His books are full of terror and gore. And if you like your mythological take-offs, you'll know of Ashwin Sanghi. His books are full of epic intrigues. And that's why, when the two meet, you are more than a little surprised.

"I don't want to be known as a mythology writer," Sanghi says. "Yes, it is a risk with my readership. But I would never do it any other way."

The bestselling author of books such as *The Rozabal Line*, *Chanakya's Chant* and *The Krishna Key* is replying to a question about deviating from the successful genre of historical fiction and mythology. If *The Rozabal Line* investigated Jesus's India connection, *The Krishna Key* was about a search for Lord Krishna's prized possession. And *Chanakya's Chant* was a potboiler that compared the current political scenario with the Mauryan Empire.

But his new book — written in collaboration with the American thriller writer James Patterson — is vastly different. *Private India* is the latest in a global partnership that Patterson has launched with other writers across the world. The Private series already has bestsellers such as *Private London* and *Private Oz*.

The joint project, Sanghi explains, took shape after a friend, who was in touch with Random House UK (Patterson's publisher), heard that they were looking for an Indian writer. "My friend suggested my name. After a few discussions the deal was signed."

The plot outline was conceived by Sanghi — based on Patterson's suggestions — and the two authors worked on multiple drafts that went to and fro over a period of six months. "The plot outline which ran into 15,000 words took me six months to write. A lot of rework from James happened in the second draft. But we never got on each other's nerves — it was so methodical," Sanghi says.

*Private India*, launched in Mumbai earlier this week, is about a detective agency based in Mumbai and its efforts to nab a serial killer.

Sanghi elaborates that he "brought in" the India story, with mythology and history. "James believes in minimalistic writing, so he would cut out all the fluff very quickly. My focus was on plot and his was on character development. We ended up with a good combination," he adds.

When it comes to books, the writer can carry on without a pause. We are sitting in the living room of his plush residence in Malabar Hills, an upscale locality in south Mumbai. Dressed in a tailored cotton shirt, brown trousers and black leather shoes, Sanghi is ready for office. He is not just a successful writer but also an entrepreneur who has businesses ranging from real estate to car dealerships, industrial gases and consumer finance.

But though it's a working day, he looks relaxed — and all ready for what turns into a long and unhurried chat. "Earlier I used to work in office all day long and then write at night. But now the work week is 30 hours and the rest of my time is devoted to writing books and marketing them," he says cheerfully.

Books also connected him to his wife Anushka and, as she walks into the room, he recounts how they got hitched. "On our first date, she kept talking about sports and I am probably the most uninterested person when it comes to sports. On our second date, she talked about books, and I was smitten," he says. They have been married for 15 years and have an 11-year-old son.

Sanghi can today choose to sit back and talk about his books. But seven years ago,



Author Ashwin Sanghi is collaborating with US thriller writer James Patterson on a book. The Indian historical and mythological fiction writer tells **Smitha Verma** that he conceived the plot while Patterson focused on character development

when he started out as a struggling writer, publishers refused to touch his work. "Being a businessman, I was used to the idea of rejection. You go to bag an order and the person refuses. So you go to the next door. When someone says 'no' to me I would understand it as 'maybe'. So that made it easy for me to keep trudging along."

He went on to self-publish his first book *The Rozabal Line* in the US in 2007 under the pseudonym Shivam Haigins, an anagram of his name. "I didn't want anyone in my business world to know about this side. I thought they would laugh at me." At that point it was only his wife who knew that he'd written a book.

In the first year, he was able to sell 900 copies. "It is a good number in self-publishing. The average self-published title sells just 57 copies," he says.

A year later, the book was picked up by Westland and published under his name in India. "It was at this time that I told my parents about my other career. My father was devastated thinking that all his money spent on my education had gone down the drain and I would turn into a jhole-trotting author. My mom, on the other hand, was elated that her son was a writer."

But Sanghi — director of the M.K. Sanghi Group — has always straddled the two worlds of business and literature. After schooling from St Cathedral and John Connon and an economics degree from St Xavier's College, Mumbai, he did his MBA from Yale School of Management in the US. At 22, the youngest to graduate from his batch at Yale, he joined the family business after returning to India in 1993.

"So by the time I reached the age of 36, I felt I was nearing retirement. Writing was my escape," he explains. "I realised I had to do something beyond what I was doing. Work was no longer exciting," Sanghi, 45, stresses.

His love for the arts was inculcated in him by his mother, who belonged to Kanpur (his father's family from Ludhiana was more business oriented). Sanghi, the youngest of three siblings, became a voracious reader at the age of 11 when his granduncle started sending him a book almost every week from Kanpur. In turn, he had to write to him explaining what he liked or disliked about the book. By the time Sanghi finished college, he had a neat pile of 400 books from his granduncle.

But his fascination for the past was triggered by his maternal grandfather who told him tales of the occult. "I enjoy writing about the past," he says. "And my mind always wants to connect the past to the present."

His first work was an example of that. He read a book titled *Jesus Lived in India* by Holger Kersten and was "fascinated with the idea that Jesus could come to India." It so happened, he says, that a few months after reading that book, he visited the Rozabal shrine in Srinagar with his wife.

"I started connecting dots and for one year I was like an obsessed man. I read anything and everything that I could lay my hands on about Jesus. It reached a point where my wife became fed up with me as I couldn't carry on a normal conversation without talking about all this. She said, 'Ashwin stop talking, start writing.' So the credit for my writing career goes to my wife," Sanghi laughs.

Today Sanghi can live off his writing. His books are being made into movies and serials. *Chanakya's Chant* (2010), which sold close to four lakh copies, was first actioned by UTV for a commercial movie and has now been picked up by another production house after the deal with UTV. A 26-episode serial will soon be shot, based on his 2012 book *The Krishna's Key* which has sold close to three lakh copies.

But Sanghi has no intentions of turning into a full-time writer. "The reason I have this fanciful imagination is partly because I lead such a boring life in my work avatar. If I don't have a boring work life, from where will I find the need for excitement," he guffaws.

In some quarters, Sanghi is often compared with Dan Brown — the author of best-seller books such as *The Da Vinci Code*. "The comparisons started because *The Rozabal Line* was released when *The Da Vinci Code* was very popular and in both the books Jesus was the central theme. At some point I was happy to enter I realised that it was a limiting comparison. I want my readers to pick my book without looking for a Dan Brown in it," Sanghi says. "In fact, the finest compliment I ever received was from a school-teacher who wrote to me saying that it was unfortunate I was being compared to Dan Brown. She said a time would come when Dan Brown would be called the American Ashwin Sanghi," Sanghi says with an impish grin.

His next writing projects include a small non-fiction title which will be published in October. Next year, Westland will publish *Shikhar Sengupta's* business conspiracy thriller set in post-1947 India.

His wife walks in again, and is surprised to find that two hours after the interview started, it's still carrying on. Sanghi is reminded that he's scheduled to be on an online portal for another interview in an hour's time. We end our chat, exchange pleasantries and as I leave, Sanghi promises to send me a signed copy of his next book.

Perhaps the writer in him wants feedback. Or it could be that the entrepreneur in him knows how to market the book. Or quite likely, it's a bit of both.