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5 questions with Ashwin Sanghi

Sana Goyal | August 3, 2015

The author will speak at Mountain Echoes, Bhutan, this year

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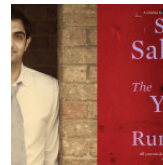
Mountain Echoes returns to the beautiful Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan this month (August 19-22)—and if you’re a lover of all things literary, this three-day festival is sure to make you happy, to say the least.

Bhutan's capital city Thimphu will play host to the beloved, albeit young, festival. The appeal and uniqueness lies in "Bhutan as a country, which is rich in culture and faithful to its tradition. Most importantly, we have kept it cosy, interactive and intimate in its nature," says Mita Kapur, CEO and founder, Siyahi, producer of the festival.

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This year marks the sixtieth birthday of His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck and is the cause for much celebration in the country. Speakers at the sixth edition of the festival include Bahar Dutt, Kalki Koechlin, Lucy Hawking, Chetan Bhagat, Janice Pariat and Ashwin Sanghi, to name a few. Literary sessions and book launches aside, you can expect workshops, music and folk dance, film screenings and other such cultural activities.

As a festival, Mountain Echoes aims to create a cultural dialogic between the neighbouring countries of India and Bhutan—and is a bustling space for bibliophiles world over. *Vogue* speaks with participating author Ashwin Sanghi, who plays his own part in holding hands when he says, "It is said that the shortest distance between two people is a story and all that I do is try to bridge that distance."

How do you feel about speaking at Mountain Echoes, Bhutan this year? Which speakers/sessions are you looking forward to?

I am delighted to be participating. Bhutan is one of the very few countries that have remained independent down the ages. Bhutanese people have successfully defended their sovereignty and I am



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certain that this emanates from independence and clarity of thought. In that sense, there can be no better place to hold a literature festival! Which sessions am I looking forward to? Well, the session on the secret keys to the universe by Lucy Hawking should be interesting. Also the session on the legacy of happiness... after all, Bhutan is one country that can play the lead role in "technology transfer" of GNH to the rest of the world!

Your writing is primarily fictional, with interspersed historical elements, leaving the audience to ask the long-debated literary question: 'How much of fiction is really fiction?' Kindly elaborate.

One of my quips is that mythology is a set of primitive lies that people rarely believe. This is rather different from history, which is a set of lies that people actually believe! "Facts" are simply those lies that we have agreed upon. To that extent, everything is fiction. If we have two hundred versions of the Ramayana, which one of those is the "real" one? I have always loved fiction that reads like fact and fact that reads like fiction. I guess it's the conspiracy theorist inside of me that loves this sort of tantalizing reading. The challenge involved is achieving the right balance between storytelling and research. I can't remember which wise man said that if you must lie, lie as close to the truth as

possible. That's precisely what I try to do.

You retell mythology and make it sit comfortably in a contemporary context—is your work aimed at a cross-generational audience?

Oh absolutely. The ages of my readers range from twelve to eighty. Each generation reads the same story differently. Younger audiences read it with a "Wow! I didn't know that!" attitude and older generations tend to read it with an "I told you so!" approach. How does it really matter if they all enjoy the story?

Some of your plot lines span across centuries and are set in multiple places—how does one begin research on such projects?

The research depends on the story. With *The Rozabal Line*, it involved reading around fifty books including *Jesus Lived in India* by Holger Kersten, *Jesus in Kashmir: The Lost Tomb* by Suzanne Olsson, *The Fifth Gospel* by Fida Hassnain, *The Unknown Life of Jesus* by Nicolas Notovich and *The Lost Years of Jesus* by Elizabeth Clare Prophet. With *Chanakya's Chant*, it was a detailed reading of the *Arthashastra* followed by an English translation of the *Mudrarakshasa*, a historical play in Sanskrit by Vishakhadatta who lived in the 4th century. With *The Krishna Key*, the research included the *Mahabharata*,

Harivamsha, and *Kalki Purana* besides more than a hundred research papers and several weeks of travel to cover Krishna sites.

Who are your chief literary influences?

It's difficult to say because I grew up reading both classics as well as potboilers. My spiritual sense is influenced by Paramahansa Yogananda, my love for fast pace and racy plots is influenced by Dan Brown and Frederick Forsyth, my fascination with historical retelling is inspired by Dominique Lapierre, my passion for research is fuelled by Arthur Hailey and my Indianness of voice is influenced by Salman Rushdie. The truth is that I was brought up on a diet of commercial fiction and thrillers for most of my growing years. Increasingly I find that I am reading much more non-fiction than fiction.

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