

Author Ashwin Sanghi discusses his latest novel - The Sialkot Saga – and how co-authoring with James Patterson for the latter's Private India: City on Fire might have influenced his writing style

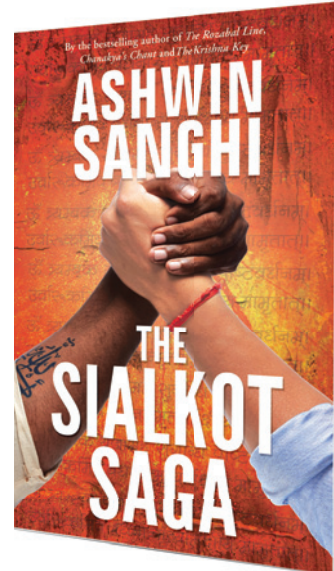
Of Steve Jobs & Sialkot



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In *The Sialkot Saga*, Ashwin Sanghi writes about one of its two protagonists, Arvind, in (erstwhile) Calcutta discussing with a friend the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri. A rising Marwari business tycoon, Arvind is at the Victoria Memorial's 'puchka joint' because the "deal is bloody bril-



liant...32 puchkas for one rupee".

That reference to the particular 'puchka joint' serving "fine, deep-fried spheres filled with a spicy mix of potatoes and chana, dunked in tamarind water" is no fluke. Sanghi says he asked more than a score of old-timers who lived in the city during the '60s, including his Kolkata-based editor's

parents. Such details, he strongly believes, give the reader a sense of the period. There are references galore; for instance, the description of The Other Room of the Ambassador Hotel (Mumbai) and its tuxedo-wearing Greek owner is a memory gleaned from his parents. "These things form the tapestry of the story."

Sanghi, who was in Bengaluru recently for the launch of *The Sialkot Saga*, looked pleased as he surveyed the mostly-young audience from behind an intricate wooden screen at the back of the hall above Bookworm, the bookstore on Church Street. It feels like he has struck the mother lode for authors – the pulse of the reader. "I have never

seen myself as a writer who has to preserve the word," he comments. "I am a storyteller and I want my stories to be heard."

The new novel is a business thriller weaving deftly through current events, ancient Indian mythology and modern Indian history, both pre- and post-partition. Such dexterous storytelling is not new to him. His first book, *The Rozabal Line* (2008) dealt with the present and the time when Jesus was said to have survived crucifixion and supposedly settled in India, a la Dan Brown. The second book, *Chanakya's Chant* (2011), a political thriller, flitted between the time of the legendary strategist Chanakya from the Mauryan Empire (340BC) and modern times. Sanghi's mythological thriller, *The Krishna Key* (2012) talked about a serial killer who believes himself to be Kalki (the last of Vishnu's avatars) and about the Yadava god Krishna's life.

But readers of Sanghi's books will notice a slight-yet-significant difference between those books and *The Sialkot Saga*. The latter comes after his association with James Patterson for the book *Private India: City on Fire* (2014). *The Sialkot Saga* has brisk, short chapters; its disrupted narration binding people, events and incidents across time spans without missing a beat. "Co-authoring with Patterson is like a masterclass in writing," Sanghi has said repeatedly. "While the first paragraph of each chapter sucks the readers in, the last paragraph hooks them enough to make them turn the page. Although the narrative is non-linear, there is an overall arc and in between, a 1,000 short stories."

The whole story of two protagonists, Arvind and Arbaaz, forays into a fascinating world. Both have, proverbially speaking, 50 shades of grey. While one is an underworld thug, the other is into white collar crime. Their two lives crisscross each other and end together. Sanghi says the idea came to him when he got to hear about scams on TV "practically every day" during the five-year regime of the UPA 2 government.

"I thought to myself if business and politics are cousins, then why not a story on it?"

Once the idea struck, Sanghi got busy – not with writing but with preparing a spreadsheet detailing the plot. "It (plot) is more important than the characters." It took him six months to meticulously fill up the spreadsheet. The columns had a yearly break-up of 60 years of the protagonists lives post-independence, their ages, what they would be most likely doing each year, and the political and social incidents of each year. Modern-day incidents such as the Mumbai terror attacks and events from pre-partition Indian history and the partition itself form an integral part of the book. A retinue of real personalities from Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Rajiv Gandhi, PV Narasimha Rao to Steve Jobs, make guest appearances.

From the ancient Indian texts, Sanghi brings in the intriguing story of Rasayana alluding to the age-old science of increasing lifespan and later, its reference to alchemy. "The stuff I write about has been written before," he notes, "but not in the realm of popular fiction." He has culled a few experiences from his life as well. Case in point is the scene when Arvind heads to Calcutta and the Munimji teaches him all the tricks of accounting. Sanghi actually comes from a business family and that was precisely what his Munimji did. Just like an expert chef, he has tossed different ingredients to create the thriller.

The prolific storyteller is elated that the movie rights for one of his books – *The Krishna Key* – have been sold to a studio. "The story will reach out to a wider audience," he says. He believes that popular realm of movies, TV serials, videogames, e-books and illustrated graphic novels will pull in more readers.

Post *The Sialkot Saga*, Sanghi has three more ideas in the thriller space. "Right now I don't see myself writing a non-thriller," he says, "but stranger things have happened."