

## Ashwin Sanghi on writing best-sellers: 'You need to be stubborn, thick-skinned'

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After Chanakya's Chant, The Rozabal Line and The Krishna Key, best-selling author Ashwin Sanghi is back with his next work in fiction, The Sialkot Saga. Released at the end of April, Sanghi's new book tells the story of two men and how their lives play out, closely inter-linked with each other's.

In an interview with Firstpost, Sanghi - who has a fairly busy time balancing his entrepreneurial interests with his writing - spoke about his new book, the art of writing a thriller and being unfazed by rejection:

**The Sialkot Saga has been pegged as a business thriller. Considering that you yourself come from a business background, did you take inspiration for the book from your own life?**

I would hope not, given that both the protagonists are crooked to the core! But yes, one does not realise the stuff that one imbibes growing up in a business environment. I remember when I had just started work at one of our factories in 1993. Our senior VP asked me to name one creature that never slept. I wasn't able to answer that and he helpfully provided me with the answer, a smug smile of satisfaction on his face. "Compound interest," he said. "That's why you always have to watch the cash flow." Stuff like that comes rather easily to me.

**Could you tell us the genesis of this book?**

The second term of the UPA was marked by a series of scams from 2009 onwards. The intense political strategising had led me to write Chanakya's Chant, which was a political thriller. But the years between 2009 and 2014 reinforced my view that business and politics were two sides of the same coin. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. If you recall, Chanakya's Chant was all about cerebral strategy and game theory. I figured that it would be a good idea to do a book on the games people play in business because it was simply the other face of the same coin.



Ashwin Sanghi's latest book is 'The

Sialkot Saga'

**This novel has been in the works for quite a while. Could you tell us the cause of the delay?**

The stew of this story has been cooking for over three years. I wanted to set a business story against the backdrop of post-independence India. The problem was that the project was so vast in scope and ambition that other projects kept coming in the way. As a result, completion of this book got held up on several occasions to make way for other books.

**Starting with *The Rozabal Line*, each book of yours has a different genre that you have worked with. Considering the change in genres, and especially weaving contemporary history into your book, what kind of research went in (*Sialkot Saga*)?**

Believe it or not, my research started with an Excel spread sheet! The first column of that spread sheet plotted the years from 1947 to 2010. The next two columns calculated the ages of the two protagonists, Arvind and Arbaaz, in each of those years. The next column plotted what was happening in India - politically, economically and culturally. The last column plotted what each of the protagonists would have been doing in that time period. The ancient track involving Ashoka, Samudragupta, Harsha etc. was the easier bit.

The more difficult part was in trying to get the contemporary history of India right. Books were able to provide recorded accounts of key historical markers but I needed more. Things like movies, music, restaurants, celebrities and culture are usually never part of the historical narrative while it is these very things that provide the flavour of that time. I was only able to fill those gaps with extensive interviews with people who had lived those years in those cities. With each reading or interview, I would jot down even more ideas. It finally resulted in a plot outline that ran to over ten thousand words.

**How has your journey, from being a complete outsider in the industry to bestselling author, been?**

I was rejected repeatedly by the publishing industry. I had to self-publish my first novel, *The Rozabal Line*. It is my belief that the only thing separating many good writers from success is the stubborn and thick-skinned approach of getting up after every failure and rejection. What has kept me going is my utter inability to take myself seriously. I understand that I am “work-in- process” and that each book is - I would hope - a little better than the previous one. When you take that approach, you accept your flaws and allow the universe to help you overcome them.

**When you started, Indian audiences in search of thrillers were reading authors such as John**

**Grisham. Given that you have also written a book with James Patterson, over time, how do you think the market for fiction thrillers has evolved in India?**

The Indian market has always liked thrillers. Hindi writers like Surender Mohan Pathak sold in lakhs at railway stations before any English writer could attain such volumes. Most of Pathak's books are thrillers. The funny thing is that English publishing was more interested in pushing foreign thriller authors to Indian audiences. Indian writers in English were expected to write non-fiction, sagas, romance, mythology... but rarely any thrillers. This was in spite of the fact that Satyajit Ray gave us the Feluda series way back in the sixties. I believe that it is a matter of time that the market for English thrillers written by Indians will pick up. Just see the bestseller racks of bookstores in the West. The top twenty slots are dominated by thrillers. India will not be an exception to the rule.

**There was a sudden boom of mythological fiction a few years ago. Where do you think it is headed?**

One can often have too much of a good thing! Every genre that is successful results in herd mentality. Mythology is currently the "sweet spot" and many new authors see it as their ticket to success. I hope that all genres will see such enthusiasm. Currently that enthusiasm is limited to mythology, romance and campus stories but there are so many genres that need exploration by Indian writers. These include thrillers, adventures, science fiction, fantasy, horror and children's tales.

**How receptive are Indian audiences to different and complex content?**

It's a challenge. Does one go after the mass market by targeting the lowest common denominator? Or does one cultivate a smaller segment that is receptive to complex and varied content? My own approach is the latter rather than the former because I have found that with every successive book my sales volumes grow. It tells me that my "niche" is expanding.

**Comparisons to western thriller authors are inevitable, and considering the storyline of The Sialkot Saga, there are bound to be comparisons between you and Jeffery Archer (because of Kane and Abel). What do you think of it?**

Frankly, I am flattered by comparisons to Jeffrey Archer and Dan Brown. Each of them is a legend in his own sphere. But I know that I can never be either of them. They are masters and I will always be a student. I don't blame Indian readers for making those comparisons but I do hope that we will eventually stop labelling Indian authors as the "Indian John Grisham" or the "Indian Sidney Sheldon" because every writer has a unique style and perspective.

As regards The Sialkot Saga, the basic structure of the book is the conflict between two men and the rags-to-riches story of an underworld thug. You can see these elements at play in countless books, movies and plays. Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet, Puzo's Godfather, Sheldon's Master of the Game, Archer's Kane & Abel, Howard Fast's The Immigrant, and Bollywood's Deewar and Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak are all varying shades of similar themes. An interesting book by Christopher Booker called The Seven Basic Plots tells us that everything ever written boils down to a mere seven basic plots and I tend to believe that theory!