

# Thriller leaps through faith, history

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DAN BROWN has spawned a slew of thrillers that synthesise history, science and religion to give us some swash-buckling reading pleasure. In *The Rozabal Line*, Ashwin Sanghi does a Dan Brown by mixing all the ingredients of a thriller — Crusades, action, adventure, suspense — and pulling off, with dexterity and ease, a narrative that careens through cultures and continents, religions and cults, and travels through Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, culminating at Vaishno Devi in Jammu. Sanghi builds his narrative around a rather astounding hypothesis that Jesus Christ survived the Crucifixion, travelled to India where he was buried in Kashmir's Rozabal Tomb, thus playing with faith and history that identifies the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City of Jerusalem as Christ's tomb.

Originally published in 2007 under his pseudonym Shawn Haigins, *The Rozabal Line's* revised edition has been published by Westland under the author's real name. Three years after it was originally published, the pacy thriller continues to pique readers' interest and whet their curiosity, a fact which finds reflection in almost all bestseller lists.

The genesis of the book, says Sanghi, goes back to 1999, when he chanced upon *Holy Blood Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln. A couple of years later, when he happened to read Holger Ker-

sten's *Jesus Lived in India*, he was fascinated with the idea that Jesus could have been inspired by Buddhism and that he may have drawn much of his spiritual learning from India. "I began to wonder whether I could marry the two theories, i.e. Jesus Christ survived the Crucifixion and travelled to India and that he left behind a bloodline", says Sanghi, adding that he spent the next two years reading every book he could find on topics he wanted to explore — the possibility of Jesus having spent his missing years as a "youth" studying in India, the theory that Jesus did not die on the Cross and that he was whisked away to safety, and the notion that Jesus travelled to India to reunite with the lost tribes of Israel who had settled in Kashmir.

After poring over 40 tomes on the subject and scouring the Internet for countless hours, Sanghi started writing *The Rozabal Line* in 2005 and finished it 18 months later.

Part of the research, of course, were several visits to the Rozabal shrine in Kashmir. Sanghi's parents often used to take him for holidays to Kashmir during the Seventies. "During these visits, we would do all the touristy stuff — including visiting Rozabal. As a child, however, I did not fully understand the significance of the tomb. It was only when I started reading *Jesus Died in Kashmir* by Andreas Faber Kaiser that I realised that the tomb was a vital slice of history, irrespective of whether one believed that Jesus Christ was buried there



THE ROZABAL LINE  
BY ASHWIN SANGHI  
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or not", says the author.

The tomb, unfortunately, has been allowed to decay. Many of the vital artefacts have gone missing. After the publication of *The Rozabal Line*, many foreign tourists flocked to the tomb to see the purported tomb of Jesus Christ. This resulted in the tomb administration shutting down the tomb to visitors completely. Sanghi says: "I have pledged that every rupee that I earn as royalty from sales of the novel shall be donated to the upkeep of this world treasure. Unfortunately, due to the present problems in Kashmir, the tomb has once again become a low priority for the state. Let's hope the situation improves and we can actually do something for the tomb to preserve it for future generations".

The Rozabal shrine, says Sanghi, contains two graves. The most recent inhabitant, Syed Naseerudin, was a

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medieval saint whose life is fairly well documented. However, the earlier inhabitant — Yuz Asaf — was buried there in 112 AD, 500 years before the advent of Islam. Yuz Asaf was a charismatic preacher who arrived in Kashmir from Israel and his name means "the healer" or "the shepherd". "So is Rozabal a Christian place of worship or a Muslim one? Both Christians and Muslims dismiss this question as blasphemy. Both religions say Jesus Christ was taken by God into heaven, while some Islamic and Christian sects say there will be a 'second coming' of Jesus Christ... But the story of the tomb in itself was not where my interest lay. I wanted to explore Buddhist influence on early Christianity. I wanted to tie in the lost or missing years of Jesus into this story. I wanted to examine the ancient connections between

India and the Lost Tribes of Israel. I wanted to explore the worship of the sacred feminine across cultures", says Sanghi.

Sanghi says his aim in *The Rozabal Line* was to unite people of different faiths via the exploration of common origins of their religions. The four subjects that fascinate Sanghi are history, religion, politics, and mythology. "In that specific order of preference", he adds. "And, funnily enough, all four are inextricably linked to each other."

In *The Rozabal Line*, it is this inextricable link that Sanghi explores.

History and mythology may fascinate Sanghi, but he doesn't see himself as someone who can write plain-vanilla historical fiction. "For me the real excitement lies in being able to use history as an explanation for a present-day event. Unless there is some relevance of history to the present or the future, I do not find the subject interesting enough for further exploration", he says.

If Sanghi's *The Rozabal Line* is a modern-day thriller that combines religion and history to weave a backdrop, his next novel treads similar territory, using a combination of politics and history. Called *Chanakya's Chant*, it attempts to analyse how politics has not changed much over 2,500 years. When the second thriller from Sanghi's stable, set in 340 BC, releases in January 2011, it'll be interesting to see how the political intrigue of ancient India compares with our present-day plots and scandals.



Ashwin Sanghi