

# PARTNERS IN CRIME

**Ashwin Sanghi** has come a long way since his debut offering in 2008, even stepping out of his comfort zone to help organise Mumbai-based literary festival, Litomania, in October last year. In conversation with **MARWAR**, Sanghi opens up about adding a non-fiction title to his repertoire, teaming up with noted suspense writer James Patterson, being a Dan Brown fanboy and the fate of commercial writing in India.

Text \* **Ranjabati Das**



## You self-published your first book and marketed it aggressively. How did being a Marwari help?

When I was writing my very first novel, *The Rozabal Line*, I kept this fact a secret from everyone except my wife. Even my parents did not know that I was writing a book. I knew that my father would get worried about my wanting to ditch the business routine in favour of writing, and hence that seemed a wise move.

The one thing that we Marwaris are trained for is to never take no for an answer. I remember that one of the earliest business lessons imparted to me by my father was that when a door is slammed shut in one's face, one simply had to find another door to knock on! I was rejected by virtually every publisher and literary agent during those early days and it was only my persistence and obstinacy that kept me going. Self-publishing a title means that one has none of the support that a traditional publisher would ordinarily bring to the table.

Whether it is pricing, cover design, PR, marketing, social media or distribution, one has to be involved personally in every little detail. Looking back at that experience, I now realise that my training from a very early age in a Marwari business made all these things much easier for me.

## Why did you choose to write thrillers, a genre that is only just coming up amongst Indian authors?

My attention span is very low. I get bored very easily. My wife is always upset with me for leaving a movie midway because I have usually figured out the ending and simply do not have the patience to sit through the rest of it. I grew up reading fast-paced fiction by Robert Ludlum, Frederick Forsyth, Tom Clancy, Stephen King, Irving Wallace, Jeffrey Archer, Sidney Sheldon, Ken Follett, Wilbur Smith and several others. I love the adrenaline rush brought on by an unexpected twist in the tale.

## Let's talk about *Private India*. How did the association with Patterson come about?

I was familiar with (James) Patterson's work, having been a big fan of his Alex Cross novels—*Along Came A Spider*, *Kiss The Girls*, *Jack & Jill*, *Cat & Mouse* and several others. It was JP's [James Patterson] London-based publisher who reached out to me and asked whether I would be

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L-R: Sanghi with Dan Brown; James Patterson



interested in penning an India-based thriller along with him. *Private India* is the eighth installment of what is known as James Patterson's 'Private' series, which is about a global detective agency that is called in to solve criminal cases that baffle the police.

*Private India* is simply an extension of that franchise to India, although what sets it apart from the other books in the series is that none of the others have mythological or historical elements, which are unique to *Private India*.

The book was meant to be a purely contemporary crime thriller. I was slightly concerned that I would be attempting something off the beaten path. But JP took care of that. He suggested that I should frame the plot outline. This meant that I was free to introduce elements that excited me. This clinched the deal.

## What inspired you to set the novel in Mumbai?

This particular story is set in Mumbai and attempts to convey the full impact of the city through Bollywood, the mafia, god-men, politicians and business tycoons! Mumbai is a study in contrasts—poverty and affluence, spirituality and sleaze, religion and crime, liberalism and conservatism—I could think of no better setting for a thriller. However, I didn't base the character of the protagonist, Santosh Wagh, on an Indian.

During the years when I was an MBA student at Yale, a middle-aged scholar would frequent the library where I did my own research. He had a mild limp and was a fountain of knowledge. He was the primary inspiration behind Santosh.

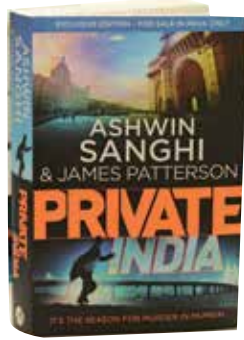
## How easy is it being a co-writer?

Effortless. James Patterson provided me with a guideline as well as an existing set of characters that needed to be developed in the story. Using his guideline, I developed a plot outline. We discussed the plot outline in detail and froze it after amendments. I then proceeded to write the first draft with the second and third drafts being written by James. Then the editors at Random House took over. Working with James has been a refreshing experience. My focus has always been on research while the Patterson formula has concentrated on pace and plot.

## I had the feeling that the book could be easily turned into a Bollywood movie.

## Do you have Bollywood aspirations like Chetan Bhagat?

I am a storyteller. I strongly believe that a good story lends itself to alternative languages and formats. The same story can also be conveyed through an illustrated book, a comic, a video game, TV series or movie. Most of my titles are available as translations in Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati,



*Clockwise from top left: Sanghi with poet-adman Prasoon Joshi; Private India is the eighth instalment in Patterson's bestselling 'Private' series; Guests at the launch of Private India at Oberoi Trident, Mumbai last year*



Tamil, Telugu, etc. Similarly, my titles are available as e-books and some as audiobooks. I hope that my stories will find their way into multiple formats of storytelling, not just movies.

**You are on the advisory board of a new literary festival called Litomania which debuted in Mumbai last year. What drew you towards it?**

Sangram Surve, the head of TWN (Think Why Not), the agency that assists me with marketing my books, was spearheading the initiative. He requested some authors (Ravi Subramaniam, Amish Tripathi and myself) to join the advisory board. I think Litomania is particularly important because it allows young and upcoming authors to meet and interact with established ones. Moreover, it is focused on popular writing. In effect, Litomania takes its cue from what India is reading.

**You've been heralded as the Indian Dan Brown ...**

I'm flattered because Dan Brown is one of the greatest theological thriller writers that the world has seen. I have always believed that there is more that unites, than divides,

world religions. Dan has exactly the same view. I have held the view that God can be defined mathematically as God = Infinity - Knowledge. Whatever part of the infinite universe we cannot understand, we attribute to God. Dan calls it 'God of the Gaps'. God, in his view, simply fills the gaps in human understanding.

The comparison is misplaced though. While it is true that we both write what is commonly viewed as 'conspiracy fiction', our styles and treatment of the subjects are radically different. And yes, I have read all of Dan Brown's books and am one of his biggest fans.

**Do you find that Indian writers have an edge over their international counterparts when it comes to historical conspiracy thrillers because of the vast resources of mythology that we have at hand?**

Oh, absolutely. We have an unlimited supply of stories and tales that need to be brought out of the musty shelves. Retelling mythology in a simpler fashion is one way to approach the task. Another way is to explain mythological events in light of modern science and research. My way is the

latter, but I blend it with a contemporary tale. The key, however, is one's ability to use the tale intelligently.

**Why don't we see more Indian thriller writers?**

Why only thrillers? Commercial writing in general did not take off primarily because of our snobbish attitude towards it. Most Indian authors were busy churning out literary fiction and publishers continued to actively search for the next Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh or Jhumpa Lahiri. They could hardly be bothered with finding the Indian equivalent of Robert Ludlum or Jack Higgins! Satyajit Ray would not have given us Feluda if an Indian market for mysteries, suspense, adventure and thrillers did not exist. It's sad that we allowed ourselves to cede space to foreign authors in these genres. I'm happy to see that this is changing rapidly now. We should have our own versions of Miss Marple, Jack Frost, Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, Adrian Monk, Sherlock Holmes, Inspector Morse, Sarah Lund, Jane Tennison and Hercule Poirot!

**You have recently made a foray into non-fiction with 13 Steps To Bloody Good Luck. What will we see more of in the future, fiction or non-fiction, and why?**

I plan to alternate between fiction and non-fiction. I have realised that there are many topics that I wish to talk about but do not see myself as the sort of person who would be satisfied contributing to a weekly column. My non-fiction titles will give me the opportunity to cover topics that are close to my heart. However, I shall never compromise as regards my first true love—mythological and historical thrillers.

**Any thoughts on your next book?**

My next solo venture, *Sialkot Saga*, is about a business dynasty. The story kicks off in Sialkot in modern-day Pakistan in 1947. I think that my readers will love it. Lots of history in addition to the usual plot twists. I have always believed that a good novel should entertain, educate and enlighten. I hope to achieve all three objectives with *Sialkot Saga*.\*