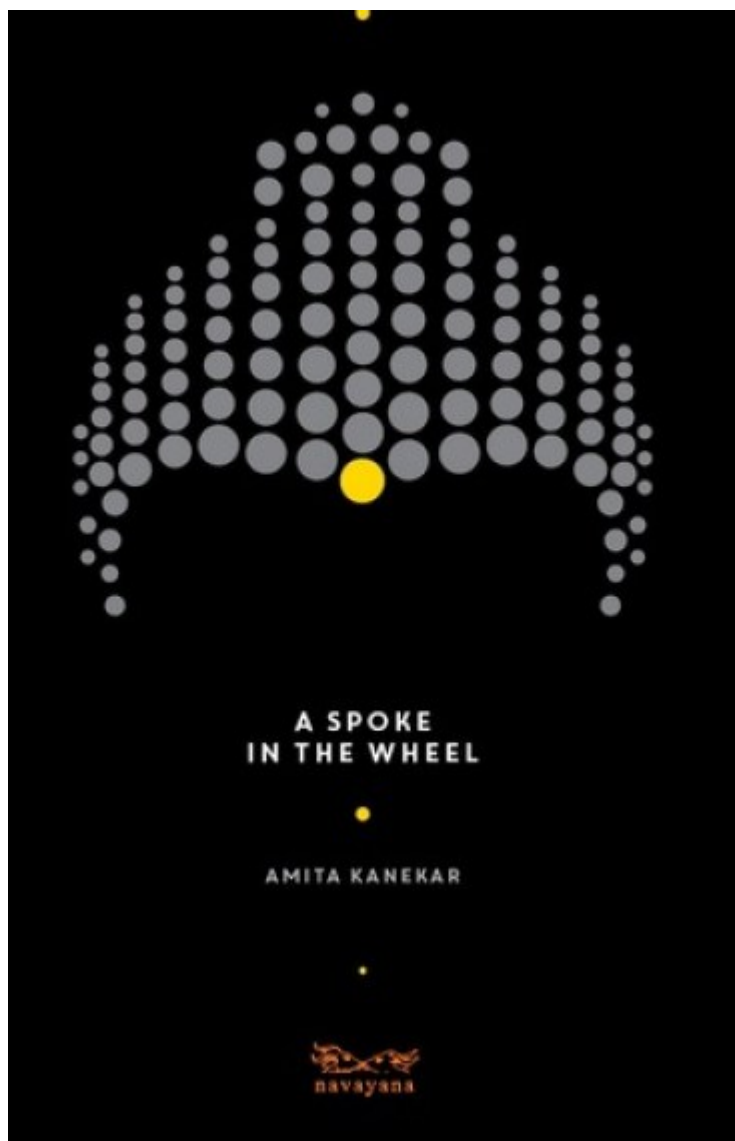


Courtesy: D. N. Jha, Outlook India.



For historians, historical fiction is bunk. History's gripping enough, so I can't understand why writers would want to fictionalise it. I rarely read fiction myself, and historical fiction, never. But having read Amita Kanekar's novel about Emperor Ashoka and Buddhist monk Upali, I must admit it successfully captures the stress and strains of monastic life, and brings alive the centuries following the death of the Buddha, a period when his teachings were taking the form of a canonical corpus. While many historical fictions make only tenuous references to real history, the present one doesn't. That's precisely my problem with it: the facts. It's true Ashoka had an important role in systematising and interpreting the Canon, but his commissioning a monk to put down his life and teachings is not borne out by historical evidence.



Nor was Upali, who systematised Buddhist ideas on monastic rules and discipline, a Kalingan contemporary of Ashoka, as Kanekar makes him out to be. He was born three centuries earlier, one of the chief disciples of the Enlightened One. In other aspects, however, the story is reasonably close to historical fact and is an interesting mix of erudition and historical

imagination, even if at times imagination does obstruct the flow of the narrative.



Review: A Spoke in the Wheel