

What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

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A Novelist Unveils India's Dirty Little Secret

by Michele Alperin



Shobhan Bantwal

Cosmopolitanism and religious commitment coexisted in the childhood home of Shobhan Bantwal, a Robbinsville resident and author of her second novel, "The Forbidden Daughter." In her hometown of Belgaum, situated midway between Bombay and Bangalore in southwestern India, her mother prayed for half an hour morning and evening in the separate altar room in their home. She would burn incense and light oil lamps in the presence of framed photographs and silver idols of Hindu gods and goddesses. Her father, an ophthalmologist, was not all that religious.

Yet both of her parents were open-minded. They had friends from all different religions to dinner at their home, and Bantwal remembers her mother enjoying her yearly trek to midnight mass on Christmas Eve with two of her best friends who were staunch Catholics.

Bantwal's hometown had only one school that taught all subjects in English — a parochial boarding school. She and her four sisters, day students, were taught primarily by nuns. "We were completely exposed to Catholicism and eventually knew more about the Bible than the Hindu scriptures," says Bantwal.

Bantwal says her school experience also broadened her outlook, because she was exposed to students from many different religious traditions — including Muslims, Jews, and different Christian sects. At home she and her sisters did participate in all the Hindu religious festivals, but did not have the time to delve into the religious aspects of what their mother did at home.

Of the five sisters, Bantwal says she was the standout — the tomboy and hellion who made her "perfect Brahmin sisters" — modest, appropriate, and diligent in school — look good in contrast.

Bantwal has drawn on the unique cultural influences of her childhood to craft "The

Forbidden Daughter”and will read from it on Thursday, September 4, at Barnes & Noble at Princeton Marketfair.

Bantwal received her bachelor’s degree at a college in town and then a master’s degree at a university about 50 miles away; both degrees are in sociology. Despite Bantwal’s relatively cosmopolitan upbringing, tradition won out when it came to marriage a year later. Like Isha, Bantwal’s marriage was arranged by her parents. Her husband-to-be had already been working in the United States for three years when her parents picked him out for her. The two sets of parents got together, matched their children’s horoscopes, and decided it would work.

Although the two had seen each other’s pictures, they met only two days before they became engaged and then got married 10 days later. “Maybe because we were conditioned to that — that’s the way we grow up — it didn’t seem like anything strange,” she says.

On the other hand, she remembers it being a little awkward. The couple was surrounded by both sides of family, including Bantwal’s four married sisters, and they had no privacy to talk. She does admit to having been a little anxious. “It is very nerve-wracking because you are marrying a stranger and don’t know what the future will be.”

But even if it seemed then like a big gamble, the traditional ways have worked well for her. She has been married for 35 years, and her husband is now retired and handles her website and the business side of her literary work.

After their wedding, Bantwal’s husband had to return to the United States once his three-week vacation was over, but she had to wait a couple months for a permanent visa.

Since her arrival in the United States in 1974, Bantwal has been in New Jersey. She did not work for several years. In the early years her husband wanted her to join him on his many business trips, and once they settled down and bought a house, she was expecting a baby.

While their daughter was little, Bantwal returned to graduate school, this time in public administration at Rider University, and by the time her daughter was ready for first grade, Bantwal had finished her master’s degree.

She started out in the private sector and then moved to the New Jersey Department of Labor, where she has been for 16 years. She supervises a state program that responds to mass layoffs by placing representatives from her unit on-site to help people register for unemployment and coach them on writing resumes and interviewing for jobs.

But midlife crisis hits even the happily employed and for Bantwal it meant expanding her life interests. Because she wanted not only to write but also to be on stage, she wrote, directed, and acted in a humorous play at an Indian-American convention in Chicago — only to find that the enthusiasm of the audience inspired her to think about writing seriously.

Not too long after, in 2002, Bantwal’s husband was forced into early retirement by his Princeton company and then immediately rehired as a consultant for a project in

Baltimore. "He was not home weekdays, and I needed a hobby to occupy myself in the evenings," says Bantwal. So she started writing social interest articles for Indian and Indian-American publications, which were well received, and which encouraged her yet again. "My ambitions started to grow," she remembers.

Like Bantwal, Isha Tilak, the protagonist of "The Forbidden Daughter," also has lots of spunk. After her husband is killed during an apparent robbery, Isha finds herself still living with in-laws who had encouraged her to abort her expected baby because it was another girl. Isha manages to bite her lip and play the good daughter-in-law until her father-in-law is abusive to her daughter — the last straw after years of his ignoring the child. She packs their bags and escapes to a nearby convent with her daughter.

The convent where Isha (unaware until after her husband's death that she was pregnant with their second child) gives birth to a second daughter was modeled after the parochial school Bantwal attended as a child. "That was the image I had before my eyes when writing about her being in a convent," she says.

After writing some short fiction, Bantwal won honorable mentions in competitions held by *Writer's Digest* and *New York Stories* magazine and was inspired to take a creative writing course at Mercer County Community College. A class project, originally a short story, which also appeared in a *U.S. 1 Summer Fiction* issue, grew into her first full-length novel, "The Dowry Bride."

Bantwal's books reflect her long-time identification as a feminist. As a sociology major, she remembers many discussions about women's rights and social issues affecting women. The subjects for her first two novels grew out of these interests. "The Dowry Bride" has to do with dowry abuse, where families would mistreat young brides who they felt did not bring with them a sufficient dowry. "When I decided to write a story," she says, "I thought it would make an interesting theme — it would be educational and entertaining at the same time."

The subject of the first book dovetailed into that of the second — abortions of female babies. "When I was growing up," says Bantwal, "gender-based abortions were unheard of." But with the development of sonograms things have changed. "In a male-obsessed society, it was like a perfect tool was handed over to them," she says. In "The Forbidden Daughter" her anger lambastes both the grandparents who yearn for boys to carry on the family name and obstetricians who perform illegal abortions at their behest.

Bantwal thought this book would be a good follow-up to the first. Even though she did not personally know people who were affected either by dowry abuse or gender-based abortion, she says she had read about cases in newspapers and magazines and was always intrigued by them.

Getting the books written, however, is only the first tiny step toward getting them published, but persistence eventually paid off for Bantwal. She started by sending out query after query to agents, catching the interest of two or three. It was agents Stephanie Lehmann and Elaine Koster who sold her book to Kensington — a publisher of women's, mainstream, and commercial fiction — as part of a two-book contract.

Even then, says Bantwal, the battle is not over. "Promotion is the hardest part of it."

In fact she ranks promotion as the most difficult task — ahead of writing the book, finding an agent, and finding a publisher. The problem is that 90 percent of the promotional work must be done by the author. “Most of the publishers put a little bit of money behind authors,” she says, “but most of the budget is set aside for big names.”

Undeterred, Bantwal rolled up her sleeves and sent out lots of press releases. She has gotten feature stories and smaller articles in many New Jersey newspapers. In terms of promotional tools Bantwal calls the Internet a “real boon to writers.” Without having to go to bookstores, authors can use a virtual tour operator to take them to different blogs, where a blogger may review a book and interview the author. Bantwal is careful to pick bloggers who are both interested in the topics she writes about and have good readership. She has also bought ads on Internet sites she thinks will be popular with potential readers.

Bantwal also sends out advance reading copies of her book in hopes that readers will post reviews on their websites, and she is also doing book talks at libraries and bookstores.

Bantwal’s only problem these days is that she is so busy at work she doesn’t have a lot of time for either writing or promotion. The state offered an early retirement package and she now has fewer people in her department. “We are going through our own downsizing pains as we have been helping others with theirs,” she says.

For a woman who started writing in the midst of menopause — “Fortunately for me, along with the annoying hot flashes and a few other woes, the creative half of my brain shot into overdrive,” she writes on her website, www.shobhanbantwal.com — a bit of work stress is not likely to present more than a small challenge to developing her new-found creativity.

Shobhan Bantwal, Thursday, September 4, 7 p.m., Barnes & Noble, MarketFair, 3535 Route 1 South. Bantwal, a Robbinsville resident reads from her second novel, “The Forbidden Daughter,” set in India. 609-897-9250.