

# As babes mouth it!

**LAUNCH** Anu Jayanth's "The Finger Puppet" talks of the Vedas through the lives of children

Anu Jayanth, all shy smiles and bashfully fluttering eyelashes among flashing cameras, seemed taken aback by the attention she received at the launch of her maiden novel by Harper Collins. But she might as well have expected it, since Pandit Ravi Shankar released the book. And since when did the sitar maestro get interested in debutant novelists?

Perhaps since his sister-in-law became one. In the time honoured Indian tradition, which *jija* has been able to resist the request of a *saali*? So, true to tradition, the big names of the Shankar family — Panditji, Anoushka and Sukanya (Anu's elder sister) — arrived to whoop cheerily for the author.

But Ravi Shankar's sister-in-law hasn't just written any old story. Anu's "The Finger Puppet" is an autobiographical novel. One in which you could safely bet on the inspiration for at least one character — the beautiful Padmini, whose childhood ambition, her sisters blurt out one day, is to marry Pandit Ravi Shankar!



**A FAMILY GESTURE** Anu Jayanth at the launch

PHOTO: SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

The novel has "borrowed shamelessly" from Anu's family, the author concedes.

When Anu remarks, "As it is I'm a recluse, and once you start writing, you become even more of a recluse," one is tempted to ask if that is a quality she shares with her protagonist Tara, who opens her heart only to her own finger puppet. Anu emphatically denies the parallel. "I'm definitely not the narrator."

Admittedly, her narrator is not

Tara, but her finger puppet, who, in truly surreal fashion, develops a personality and a life all her own, quite separate from that of Tara. So when the U.S.-based author adds, "But most of us in India tended to play with our thumb," the field is open to speculation again.

However, drawing parallels to real-life characters need not overly concern readers, and the author certainly has a greater purpose. The novel, believe it or not, start-

ed as Anu's research into the Vedas, in which she has an abiding interest.

"It started as non-fiction. But I was not looking at it like a historian or a scholar, but as a person with imagination," she reveals, an American twang corroborating her 24 years in the U.S. "The essence of the novel is the Vedas."

## About the Vedas

Anu considers the Vedas one of the great treasures of India, but not in the jingoistic way they are projected today.

"Most people don't even know what it is when they say Hindu scriptures. First of all, the Vedas pre-date Hinduism, and then it's an oral tradition."

As for Hinduism, she is trying to remind people of the vastness of the concept, one that does not fit narrow definitions. That is why her novel contains Hindus of all hues — the idol worshipper, the agnostic, the atheist — "these are all Hindus." And, notes Anu, she has put her ideas into the words of children.

The best stories teach us something without a spelt-out moral. For the author, already working on a sequel, the message is important. "Any time a writer picks up a pen, I feel it should make a difference to at least one reader."

ANJANA RAJAN