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BOOK EXCERPT

Fiction: A traditional aristocratic Bengali family transitions into modernity after Independence

An excerpt from 'Lavanyadevi', by Kusum Khemani, translated from the Hindi by Mahanta Banibrata.

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Dec 13, 2024 · 05:30 pm



Author Kusum Khemani. | Original image via Facebook.

The blush on the cheeks of the playful dawn sun, as it emerged from behind snow-clad mountains, was tinged with Lavanyadevi's joy. Paying her obeisance to the rising sun, she set out for the temple, and met Guru-ji on her way. After the early morning darshan of Lord Shiva and his infinite grandeur, her heart was filled with rapture. Coming out of the temple, she saw a few pandas quarrelling among themselves. One of them came forward and asked Guru-ji, "Maharaj, is the patron from Bengal?" When Guru-ji nodded in agreement, he delightedly told his companions, "See, didn't I tell you so? Now just ask her: doesn't she belong to the Roychoudhury family?"

Lavanyadevi was aware that pandas – men of God who have, over generations, guided pilgrims at temples and pilgrimage sites – could also be veritable archives of one's genealogy and family history, but she was astounded that their keen eyes could recognise her the moment they saw her. Meanwhile one of the elderly priests hurried away and came back with a young lad holding a large bundle wrapped in red cloth.

At Guru-ji's suggestion, everyone moved to the ashram verandah. The elderly priest opened the bundle to tell Lavanyadevi about the various members of her maternal family – her grandfather Dhananjay-babu, her grandmother Prabhavatidevi, her uncle Soumitro Ranjan, her aunt Nalinbala, and her mother Jyotirmoyidevi – and showed her their signatures, simultaneously recounting various incidents from their pilgrimages to Kedarnath. And Lavanyadevi, who had renounced the world to embark on this pilgrimage, got entangled in the eddy of worldly memories.

Possessed of unmatched intelligence and a photographic memory, her mind immediately brought alive a vast swathe of time with the minutest details of incident and dialogue. Valmiki was moved by the suffering of a heron as it wailed in grief at the death of its partner, who was killed by a hunter's

arrow as the herons were engaged in making love. The pain that Valmiki experienced flowed out in the form of the verses of the Ramayana. The incidents recounted by the priest, the signatures of her family members and their old portraits painted by an artist from the hills carried Lavanyadevi back to the lush foliage of her childhood memories.

The time that she had spent with her mother Jyotirmoyidevi at her nana-bari, her maternal grandmother's home in East Bengal, was a priceless inheritance. Jyotirmoyidevi, usually solemn and restrained, would become gay, expressive and playful once she was at her mother's, filling the house with laughter and cheer, and her affection towards her daughter would transport the young girl to the seventh heaven of delight. Lavanya loved these visits. She eagerly looked forward to them and would insist on spending her entire holidays at her nana-bari. Even if Jyotirmoyidevi was sometimes unable to accompany her, Lavanya would go alone. There, she would spend all her time with her grandfather, uncle and aunt, listening to stories that transported her into the enchanting world of the past.

Jyotirmoyidevi was efficient, strict and particular in word and deed, and that was probably why she could craft miracles. She was constantly writing something in a large notebook, and would put it back in her drawer and lower the lid the moment anyone entered her room.

One day, finding the room empty, Lavanya quickly lifted the cover of the drawer and peered inside. "Oh! So many notebooks!" she exclaimed as she took out a notebook from the bottom of the pile and hid it in one of her course books, eager to read it.

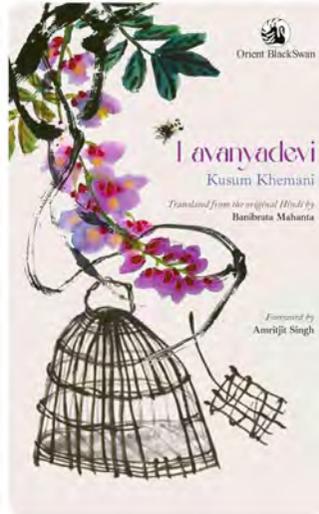
"Arey! Is this a diary or a novel?" she wondered. "The heroine is blessed with the best of virtues and she seems as beautiful as a Raja Ravi Varma painting!"

Surprisingly, Lavanya's maternal grandmother, Prabhavatidevi was the exact antithesis of her mother, being both astute and expressive. She always had a smile while talking to everyone, was ever ready to tease her friends, and was fond of dressing up well, visiting places and loved chatting with people. A platoon of servants was always ready to dance attendance upon her. So she did not have much to do, and spent her time chatting with her mother-in-law and her husband, gladdening their hearts while Prabhavatidevi, who was still into hopscotch and playing with marbles, was just fifteen.

The royal priest asked for the girl's horoscope, and on seeing that it promised rajayoga – which meant that she would acquire wealth and fame and live like royalty – he thought it opportune to broach the subject of Dhananjay-babu's proposal with Prabhavatidevi's widowed mother. Bhuvaneshwaridevi, on hearing the proposal, felt what a blind person would if promised vision in both eyes. Her poverty had made her increasingly anxious about how rapidly Prabhavatidevi was approaching womanhood. A large dilapidated old house, in which her three daughters wore the same one or two good clothes and shared other pieces of clothing turn by turn caused the mother so much worry that she was reduced to a quarter of herself. In the absence of the master, the paltry sums of money that the workers who tended to the farms and cattle handed over to the widowed mistress were hardly sufficient to take care of the family's needs. And need one even talk about the customs of respectable Bengali families of the time? Whether the kitchen fires were lit once a day or just once in two days, it was mandatory for the daughters of the family to be well-versed in music, dance, studies and embroidery.

As daughters in Bengal are treated with considerable respect and affection, they grow up with an easy openness. Bhuvaneshwaridevi's three daughters would go for a swim not just to the family pond but also to the Padma and Meghna rivers nearby. No one ever seemed to mind or even notice. It was Dhananjay-babu's sight, like Rishi Vaishampayan's, which had placed his Sita-Satyavati Prabhavatidevi

in the temple of his heart and had led him to send his family priest to this household with his marriage proposal.



Excerpted with permission from Lavanyadevi, Kusum Khemani, translated from the Hindi by Mahanta Banibrata, Orient Black Swan.