

Outlook

Book Excerpt | 'Lavanyadevi' By Kusum Khemani

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Book cover of Lavanyadevi **Photo: Orient Black Swan**

As soon as she heard these words, Mami's face lit up with the joy of the fulfilment of a long-awaited wish. But Mama, like Khwaja Nasiruddin, finished his sentence thus, "but Suryabaladevi! I am always so worried about all of you. See, I can offer this bottle to the Supreme Almighty and, believe me I will not experience an iota of sorrow in doing so. But, what will happen to you after that?" Saying this he furrowed his brow as if in deep worry. Mami excitedly said, "What will happen to me? Arey! I will be overjoyed and offer a lot of prasad to the Lord!" "That is all fine. But listen carefully to what I have to say. See, I am like an insignificant clay doll. If I get drunk, I lie quietly in a corner. But if the Master of all the three universes gulps down the whole bottle and starts nodding off in a state of intoxication, what will happen to all of you? Every morning, you keep Him captive in your doe eyes.

If He gets drunk, how will you keep your mind occupied? And moreover, what will happen to this planet then? Will not His divine inebriation lead to tandav and absolute mayhem and bring about the end of this universe?" It took some time for Aniruddha Mama's sarcasm and humour to sink in, but it did. Mami slapped her forehead in exasperation and said, "Oh! You are impossible! It is futile to argue with you." Mama-ji took her hand in his, trying to persuade her to calm down, but she jerked her hand away and stomped off, and as soon as she disappeared from the scene, young Lavanya and her uncle were both in splits.

Small, beautiful episodes like these not only repair the cracked, broken walls of human life, they also paint it in new colours and open casements for light to stream in; it is through incidents like these that people garner the strength to move on. Family probably means a protective shell within which a person feels secure—a safe passage indirectly promised. Lavanyadevi was suddenly reminded of the time when, as a six or seven-year-old, she had accompanied her maternal grandfather Dhananjay-babu, Soumitro Mama and her mother Jyotirmoyidevi to the shraddh ceremony of Champa Nani's husband Mangatrai-ji.

Champadevi's children, Purushottam and Savitri, had taken great care to nurture their mother's relationship with Prabhavatidevi's family and keep it alive. Champadevi's granddaughter Pushpa and Prabhavatidevi's granddaughter Lavanya played for hours at a stretch at Purushottam's place, swinging on the swings that were hung from the branches of the tall trees in the garden and running around the big lawn in front of the house. Lavanya and Pushpa, both the centres of their respective families, got along well with each other. Purushottam Mama was dead against petty rituals, but both Indira Mami and Savitri Mashi were acutely conscious of their social standing. Since Purushottam Mama held his father in extremely high regard, he had arranged for the best brahmins with excellent command of the Vedas for the cremation.

Mama was, however, particularly ill-disposed to the family priest, Bhagwati Maharaj. Not only was the priest illiterate and uncouth, he also consumed drugs like cannabis and opium with abandon, and was a blot on the image of the brahmin. Purushottam Mama believed that donating money to the undeserving was sin, and felt that the entire sum of money that was ritually mandated to the family priest should instead be donated for some good cause. But Savitridevi and Indira Mami were adamant in this regard. The rituals finally began. Pandit-ji was made to sit on a velvet mattress placed on a silver bed decked with velvet quilts and pillows.

There, on one side, were silver dishes, gold jewellery sets, expensive clothing and numerous other items piled up like all those expensive accoutrements placed inside the pyramids of the pharaohs of Egypt. As per custom, Indira Mami made a semicircular motion with the loose end of her sari to symbolically bestow all this on Pandit-ji and formally donated everything to him. Lavanyadevi recollected every detail of how both girls, Lavanya and Pushpa, half-hanging out of the first-floor window of the Merlin Park bungalow in excitement, could clearly see and hear whatever was going on in the courtyard below.

Kusum Khemani they heard Savitridevi's loud voice crackling across the courtyard, "Purushottam! Don't talk rubbish! Why are you after this poor man's life?" "That's great, Sawaa!" he retorted. "When this good-for-nothing rascal is intent on swallowing all the wealth, then why not the opium too! Who else is it supposed to be for? He has to have the opium too, right here and right now," said Mama. "Gathro!" he called out to Indira Mami, using her nickname, "get a glass of water for Pandit-ji." There was a deathly silence in the courtyard. Indira Mami just stood there, dazed, unable to move, looking in turn at Savitridevi and in the direction of the small gold container in which a ball of opium was symbolically kept.

Since Mangatrai-ji used to consume a pinch of opium every day, a quantity approximately equivalent to his annual consumption was kept in the container. Purushottam Mama knew well enough that if this stupid brahmin gulped down the entire quantity of opium, he would surely die then and there; but he wanted to demonstrate his anger about the donation to Bhagwati Maharaj and get even with his family members for wasting money in this manner and hence refused to budge from his position.

However, on the insistence of Dhananjay-babu, Soumitro Ranjan, Jyotirmoyidevi and all the other elders present there, he relented. As he threw the container on a plate and turned to go indoors, Savitridevi caught hold of the angavastra on his shoulder and pulled him back, saying, “Arey wait, brother! Where are you off to? Get Pandit-ji to lie on the sukh shaiyya, the bed of comforts, and swing the bed for him. It is only then that Bau-ji will be able to get all these things.” “Sawaa, have you gone crazy? This addict! This useless fraud! He will help my saintly father cross the river Vaitarani?” But seeing Savitridevi’s entreating eyes and Indiradevi’s folded hands, Purushottam Mama relented once again. He called the children who were present. “Devaki! Vijay! Soumitro! Come here and help me lift this bed up,” he said. The three young men immediately hauled the bed up, with the priest sitting atop it, as far as they could raise their arms.

The scrawny, haggard priest, already scared at the height to which the bed had been raised, was terrified as it lurched to the left and to the right and swayed dangerously as it was swung energetically by the young men. Lavanyadevi clearly remembered how absolutely delighted she and Pushpa were at the sight of that swaying bed, clapping and egging the young men on. “Wah Mama-ji! Well done! Raise it higher! Yes! Still higher! Bring it to the level of the window!” they shouted. Ayah Didi, who was standing behind them, smacked them gently on the head and said, “Ore! Chup koro re! Be quiet, will you! Mama-ji has gone crazy. Look at Mami and Ma—they have both turned pale! Durga, Durga...rokkhha koro! Goddess Durga save us!” Meanwhile the poor priest was shivering uncontrollably, as if he was afflicted with malaria. He was perspiring heavily and unable to utter a word.

He tried to balance himself on the bed with both his hands and get up, but given the situation, how could he? And even if he did manage to get up, where could he go? He was dumbstruck with terror, but his petrified eyes pleaded with Savitridevi, begging for his life. The God-fearing Savitridevi was unable to bear this sight. In the end the curtains came down on this scene when, unable to bear what was going on any longer, Savitri Mashi came forward and delivered a stinging slap on her son Vijay’s cheek and said, “Lower the bed immediately. Your Mama is out of his senses. If this son of a brahmin were to die tomorrow, what will happen to Bau-ji’s soul?” This impact of the slap was felt by the other three as well even though they had not been hit. On being rebuked in this manner by his elder sister, Purushottam Mama abruptly let go of the bed in mid-air and walked off, but the other three, out of their fear of Savitridevi, somehow managed to balance the tottering bed and bring it and the terrified priest down to the ground safely.

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