

Praise for the book

‘The new stories are stamped with some familiar hallmarks – they’re told with a warm heart, good humour and a sharp eye for injustice’ *Vogue*

‘Khanna’s language is easy on the senses. She evokes vivid images in her character sketches that appear to have been done with a caring brush’ *Times of India*

‘Tacit social commentary layered with whimsy and plenty of humour’ **Livemint.com**

‘The stories are simple, uncomplicated but pack a smooth punch... Effortless, unexaggerated and unpreachy, but still... touching a chord’ *Financial Express*

‘Incisive, funny and filled with a brand of wit we’ve now come to associate with her’ *Elle*

‘Twinkle is surely the star we waited till sunset to see’
Indiatoday.com

‘[Khanna] focuses on women-centric issues that are on everyone’s minds but seldom talked about’ *Verve*

‘Khanna...infuses each story with a subtle originality. The stories speak of the plight of being a woman, as well as

look at the world from the standpoint of a suffering male'
Sunday Guardian

'The book shows...a Khanna of many shades: simplistic, eccentric, heart-warming, uplifting, entertaining' **Scroll**

'Beautifully crafted yet simply told. Khanna's style is effortless and descriptive' **Huffington Post**

'A mature Khanna treading serious territory, showcasing an India we largely know about, but prefer not to bother or think about' **Catch News**

'There is something about Tina Khanna. She is as uncomplicated as her writing... Tina's voice is as friendly as your next-door neighbour' *Asian Age*

'Although she delves into serious subjects pertaining to women, her sense of humour punctuates the narrative in just the right places' **DNA**

'There is an instant emotional connect with her stories because behind those endearing sentiments lies the heart of a sensitive writer' *Deccan Chronicle*

'Calling a spade by its real name is one of the biggest strengths of the book and the writer does it with élan'
Manoramaonline.com

'For all the gravity of the subject, you will find yourself smiling... This book is about hope and courage... A truly magical and inspiring read' **Shethepeople.tv**

The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad

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Twinkle Khanna

 juggernaut

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For Akshay

*Each time there is a power cut,
you, my friend, always have a flashlight handy*

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The Legend of
Lakshmi Prasad

Sandwiched between the river Kosi and the holiest of all rivers, the Ganga, there lies a village surrounded by thousands of trees. The foliage is so dense that it is difficult to see the rooftops of the small, brightly coloured houses that line up against the unpaved roads.

The trees all bear a precious fruit called jardalu, a golden mango so sweet that once eaten its taste lingers in your mouth for days, like a drizzle of scented sunshine. But it's not just its magical fruit trees that makes this village special. There's one thing even more remarkable about this place – it is the only village in the entire district where the birth of a girl child is celebrated with joy.

Once upon a time, though, this village used to be just like all the others – a brown, dusty land with small paddy fields, where boys were revered, while tiny baby girls were considered a burden

and sometimes drowned in the river. Things changed because of a young girl and her name was Lakshmi Prasad.



‘Ma! Take me also with you!’ Lakshmi called out as she ran alongside the bullock cart. Surabhi Devi, Lakshmi’s mother, was going to the nearby town to shop for Lakshmi’s older sister Sukriti’s wedding. She shooed her daughter away, her blue sari fluttering in the wind, and finally giving up, Lakshmi came to a halt on the dusty road and watched the bullock cart with her mother disappearing further and further away, towards Munger, a town that Lakshmi had heard so much about but had never visited.

It began to rain and Lakshmi walked back home briskly. Her yellow salwar kameez, already too short for her, was drenched and clung to her back. Her two pigtails, oiled and tied with black ribbons, were swinging in the wind as she began to run towards her house.

Her sister was sitting under the covered porch

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with two of her friends and ignored Lakshmi as she walked by, aside from a perfunctory wave.

Sukriti never seemed to have time for her nowadays. The three-year age gap between the two sisters had not been a problem all these years when they played together, spending hours on the swing under the banyan tree by their house.

Lakshmi would sit on the swing, her sister standing behind her on the wooden plank, her salwar brushing against Lakshmi's back as they swung back and forth, the thick branch above creaking with their weight.

But now all of a sudden, Sukriti didn't have the inclination for what she called childish games. Wearing her mother's saris, she would sit with girls her own age, daydreaming and chattering about her upcoming wedding and her life ahead as a grown-up woman with a household of her own.

Lakshmi lay down on the mat spread out on the mud floor of her house. She looked around the room with its soot-darkened walls. One wall was taken up by utensils and the cooking hearth. On the other side stood a simple wooden shelf with idols of Brahma, the creator, Lakshmi, the goddess

of wealth, and Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom. A red hyacinth flower and the stub of an incense stick decorated this simple altar.

She could hear snatches of the conversation on the porch interspersed with her sister's giggles. Feeling left out, she came out to the porch and sat at the other end, pretending to look away from the girls, into the rain.

Her sister and her friends lowered their voices, whispering among each other, and Lakshmi, now frustrated and bored, began to interrupt their conversation with random observations much to their annoyance.

She commented on a passing stray dog and the time a bee had stung Lachu, who lived next door. Hoping to show her sister's friends how close she still was to Sukriti, she said, 'Remember, Sukriti, we were playing langdi, and you got tired of catching me and we ate twelve whole mangoes and buried all the seeds in two holes with our sticky hands? Come, let's go and see if the seeds grew into saplings or not!'

Sukriti laughed condescendingly, wanting to let her friends know that she was infinitely more

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mature than her younger sister. 'Have you gone mad! It's raining so heavily and if mango trees grew in a few weeks then wouldn't everyone leave the paddy fields and grow mangoes instead? It takes years and years for a jardalu tree to grow and I don't know any fool who will water it every day and then wait for eight, nine years to get their reward, unless that silly fool is you!'

Lakshmi was stung by her sister's taunts – more so because she had been going to water the two mounds ever so often. No shoots had emerged yet but she had been hopeful.

Her eyes filled with tears. Determined not to let anyone see them, she replied defiantly, 'All right then, I am a fool and I won't have to water it now because look at the sky, all the gods are doing it for me!' Then she angrily walked out into the rain without any idea of where she was heading, leaving her sister and her friends tittering.



After Sukriti's wedding, Lakshmi started helping her mother more and more with the cooking,

cleaning and washing – ‘training for her future role as a homemaker’, Surabhi Devi would say.

In the late afternoons she would take her father his lunch. Standing on the edge of the field, she would wave out till he saw her. He would then walk towards her, wiping his face with his stained cotton undershirt, hitching up his blue-and-white lungi as he climbed up the slope, his back already bent with age and fatigue. He would first take a long sip of water and then they would share chapattis with sliced onions and dal, crows hovering around them, waiting for their chance to get at a morsel or two.

Bijendra Prasad was very fond of his little daughter. He always told her that she reminded him of her grandmother. They had the same narrow hands and long face, the gap between the tip of the nose and the lips disproportionately large, but pleasing all the same.

On balmy afternoons, he would sit with her after lunch and tell her stories from the Ramayana. One day he told her about Shraavan Kumar, who looked after his blind parents, spending his whole life serving them. Engrossed in the story, he

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murmured, 'That is why a son is so important, for his old parents to lean on. With daughters, all our life savings go away in giving and giving.'

Lakshmi, now sixteen, understood that he was talking about Sukriti and the intermittent demands by her in-laws in the last year for more dowry, or gifts as they called it. But she didn't ask him about it. Just at the mention of her sister's name, her father's mouth would tighten and he would rub his bony collarbone wearily and say, 'Sukriti is all right, everything is all right, it is manageable.'

Till the day it wasn't and a sunken-eyed Sukriti, her skin stretched like paper over each protruding rib, returned home, holding the gifts her in-laws had given her in return – burns on her back, from boiling water and hot pans.

Sukriti was back and as they also discovered a few months later, looking at her growing stomach, she had not come back alone. They sent news of her pregnancy to her husband in Tulsipur but no one came to take her back.

Lakshmi began accompanying her sister for long walks in the afternoons. Sukriti's bitterness

brushed against her as they sat under the jardalu tree, squeezing the mango till it was soft, carefully biting the skin off one end and sucking the pulp, feeling the sweet juice trickling down their throats.

The seeds they had planted had grown into tall saplings but it would still be a few more years before they bore fruit.

Sukriti, her sari loosely draped over her stomach, her scarred back resting against the tree trunk, would often sigh, ‘Lakshmi, I hope this baby is a boy. Life is easier for them. We girls have nothing. We go to live in other people’s houses and they treat us like slaves. I would serve them food, and then whatever was left on their plates, I was meant to pile it all up and that was my dinner. A quarter chapatti from one plate, three spoons of rice from another, a single piece of cauliflower if I was fortunate.

‘And the taunts would never end. “What did you bring from your house that we should treat you like a queen? Tell your father to send earrings for Diwali.” Even my husband knew that he could kick me like a dog and I would crawl back with

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my head bent, willing to serve him again because there was nowhere else to go.'

Lakshmi looked at the branches filled with mangoes and asked her sister, 'Why can't we collect all these mangoes and sell them in the market like we sell paddy? Won't we get some money then?' Her sister replied, 'This is not our tree that we can collect the fruit and sell it!' To which Lakshmi said, 'But what if it were?'

Sukriti just shook her head. 'Stop daydreaming. This is just the way it is. But for my son, it will be different and with him in my arms I will go back to Tulsipur with my head held high. I already know what I will call him: Ramanand! Isn't it a nice name?'



Seasons changed. The monsoon unleashed its fury but, aside from a cow dying and their neighbour Ghanshyam's roof caving in, nothing momentous happened till the evening of Chhath puja. This was a big festival held in honour of the sun god

and, as they did every year, Lakshmi and Surabhi Devi cleaned the house meticulously.

There were bananas to fry and sweets to be distributed. The entire village would gather that evening by the river and take dips in the twilight. The air would fill with laughter and music as the older women sang songs, beating a rolling pin against metal plates, a rhythmic drumming that kept time with racing heartbeats and the ritualistic dancing.

Surabhi Devi had finished making the thekuas, a sweet made of flour, jaggery and ghee, when Sukriti went into labour. Lakshmi sat on the porch outside with her father, hearing her sister's screams till she heard a baby cry.

She rushed inside. The room was filled with the stench of metallic blood and stale sweat. The midwife was holding the baby. She passed the baby to Surabhi Devi. After a long moment, Lakshmi's mother looked up and said, 'It's a girl.' The four women in the room were silent while the baby continued to wail.

For forty days, Sukriti stayed inside the house, her ears stuffed with cotton wool so that air did not

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find a way to enter her body and disrupt its already weakened state. These were village customs based on the principles of Ayurveda – a sari snugly tied around her stomach to help her womb contract, herbal paste applied on the soles of her feet so that heat would travel up into her chest and replenish her strength.

After a few weeks, Sukriti began to feel a little like her old self again. That's when her mother suggested that it was time for her to go back to her husband's house.

Lakshmi was taken aback. Was her mother really going to pretend that Sukriti had just returned home to give birth as was customary amongst most married women? But that was exactly what Surabhi Devi had been saying to everyone in the village. Her pride would not let her admit the sorry state of affairs.

Surabhi Devi spent hours talking to Sukriti, cajoling her, pleading that her husband would treat her well now that they had a child together and her mother-in-law would mend her ways. Sukriti soon started believing that things would truly change and was ready to go back to her marital home.

The journey, however, ended before it had begun. A few days later they received a message from Tulsipur. Sukriti's in-laws had heard about the baby girl and had washed their hands of the mother and child, claiming that Sukriti had not been pregnant when she left their house. This child was illegitimate, they said.

Lakshmi looked at her sister, who had collapsed on the mud floor in despair, her thin arms encircling her bent knees as she pressed her legs against her body. She stared emptily at the small hammock where her child lay fast asleep while her mother cried, 'What will we do now? What about Lakshmi? Who will marry her? We had nothing to give and now after this...'

Her father stood in a daze, a look of desperation seeping into his eyes. He said, 'I will sell the field, I can work as a day labourer. It doesn't matter. We will give the boy's side whatever they ask. We will manage.'

In all her seventeen years, Lakshmi had never felt such rage. A blinding rage where her heart thumped, her hands trembled, even her ears felt

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like they were burning up with heat. In a quivering voice, barely in her control, Lakshmi said, 'Enough with this managing, of this bending. Ma, I am not getting married! Not till every girl in this village has something of her own. It's only when we have something that people will stop treating us like we are nothing.'

Lakshmi sat on the porch the entire night, an old shawl wrapped around her to keep her warm. Her father came out twice, trying to convince her to sleep, but she refused to move. The hours went by. Lakshmi stayed where she was, watching the waning moon in the cloudless night, hearing feral dogs barking in the distance.

She would fall asleep intermittently, her head drooping against the wooden balusters, only to wake up with a start again. She walked down from the porch just before dawn, her body stiff from sitting in the cold. She looked out at the village, the dusty road in front of her house, the empty stretch across, where once a long green snake had slithered over her foot, the banyan tree with her wooden swing swaying in the breeze. She cracked

her stiff knuckles, stretching her fingers out, as she looked down at her hands, at her ten fingers. And then she found her answer.

Carefully cleaning her teeth with a neem twig, Lakshmi washed her face with a handful of water from the metal pitcher that she had filled yesterday. Holding her aluminium lota firmly in her hand, she walked to the fallow land behind her house and went through her morning ablutions, a singular notion spinning within the labyrinth of her mind.

She got back home to find the household awake, her sister feeding little Radha, her breast and the baby's head both covered with a yellow dupatta. Her mother peeled the ginger to add to the milk, cardamom, tea leaves and sugar boiling on the hearth. Her father, his sunken eyes unable to meet hers this morning, turned away, waving an incense stick in front of the clay gods.

When he finished his prayers, Lakshmi said, 'Babuji, will you come with me? Don't ask me anything, just come.'

Bijendra Prasad walked through the village, his daughter by his side. They were conscious of eyes

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curiously watching their long, purposeful strides. This was a place where people ambled; there was no need to hurry and there really was no place to go to either.

They reached the village centre and Lakshmi knocked on Shankar Singh's door. He opened the door and she began to speak, hesitantly at first, then faster and faster. The thoughts that had been locked inside her, and had probably been rattling in her subconscious mind for years, had finally been set free. Words falling, tripping, stumbling over each other, till she finally ran out of air. She took a deep breath, stilled herself and waited for his reaction.

Shankar Singh, at eighty-three, was the oldest man in the village. He was also the most respected as he had started the small school in the village and had taught simple arithmetic, reading and writing to the village children for generations.

He looked carefully at the tall, ungainly girl, in a black blouse that was too big for her and a green sari, both of which he was certain belonged to her mother. This little girl had thought of something that had not occurred to anyone in the hundred

years that the village had existed. He asked her for time, time to absorb her ideas, and, most importantly, to convince all the people whose opinions mattered in this small community.



The jardalu tree was filled with fruit, each branch weighed down by half a dozen golden mangoes. Lakshmi had waited five months for this day – five long months in which Shankar Singh had gone from door to door to convince the villagers of her remarkable idea. She stood under the tree with him and her family, picked up makeshift cymbals made up of two metal plates and began slamming them together. Soon all the villagers gathered around the tree.

Lakshmi asked Sukriti to pass little Radha, her head covered in a pretty bonnet, a black spot on her forehead to ward off evil, to Surabhi Devi. The two sisters then used a long wooden stick and broke ten ripe mangoes off the tree, deftly using a knife to slice open the fruit.

They cut out the seeds, and planted each one