

# Leaves from a spiritual travelogue

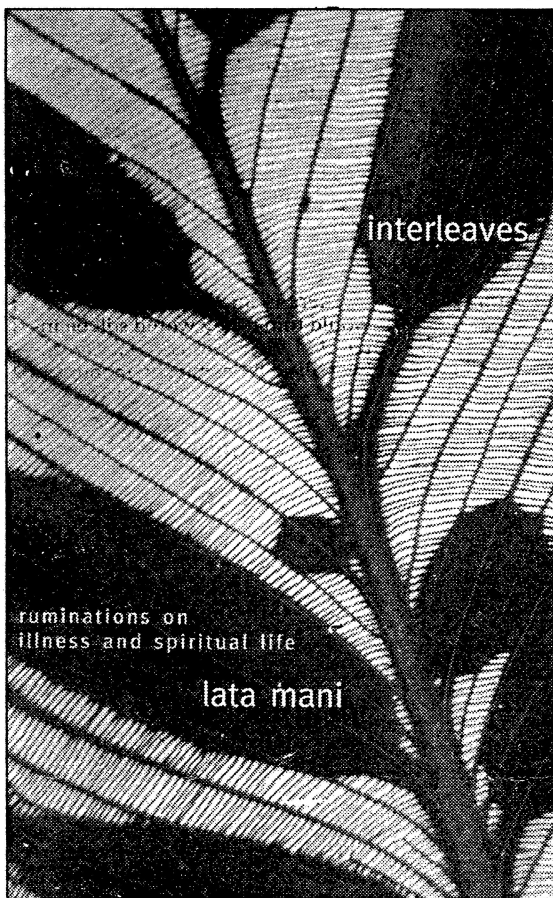
**L**ATA Mani's words sear the edge of consciousness, blurring social constructs. Whether as text or as tone, they question the essence of our existence, nudging us to explore trails beyond everyday thought. They seem the very leaves of life, tossed by untamed currents, nurtured by unseen presences, more sustaining than the grain of our mundane lives.

Here's a sampler: I turn to words as a way of composing something like a bridge, however partial, between where I have been and where I am today. The truth is, to most people a chronically or seriously ill person is either someone completely unrecognisable, or someone that they continue to interact with as though there has been no change at all."

Historian, poet and cultural critic Lata Mani — lauded in academic circles for her 1998 book, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* — speaks her new-found truth in a voice drawn from interior landscapes. Her thoughts rest between the covers of her self-published, just released book, *Interleaves: Ruminations on Illness and Spiritual Life*.

A respected historian at the University of California at Davis, Lata had a major car accident on an American freeway in January 1993. A stolen Pepsi truck, its driver on the run from police cars, crashed into her car from behind as while she was university-bound.

The closed head injury she sustained barely allowed a semblance of normal communication. While



the external injuries left few traces, the lesions on her mind, body and heart were severe. Yet, sustained by her life-changing experience, Lata recorded her thoughts on illness and spirituality on 400-odd audiotapes with the aid of a powerful microphone. The result? *Interleaves*, which sets the

are chronically ill, like the patient rendered mute at 52, whom she reached through sign language and touch. As she shared her redefinitions with them, like experiences touched deep chords, echoing as a paean to the soaring spirit.

ground beneath our feet aquiver, questioning the cliches we live by.

Lata, her face gentle and composed by the slanting light of the midday sun at her residence in Koramangala, speaks her truth gently but with inner conviction. She speaks for the injured who're not framed by a wheelchair or crutches, for those whose invisible bruises our definitions of normalcy bypass.

Today she finds it hard to read or write as she used to. Yet she shares her weekly hours of strength with those who

"If you are willing to have the courage to be open to anything, you can learn," she stresses, as if encapsulating her experience — part-prose, part-poetry, always poetic, never prosaic.

While visitors, groping for the right responses to her plight, sought refuge in triteness, she explains, "Even if you're surrounded by people when you're ill, it's essentially an internal journey. It was the solitariness that triggered an inner prompting to find the language to communicate for myself and for others. My situation triggered existential questions."

But publishers in the US balked at her manuscript, which didn't fit into their format of best-selling do-it-yourself self-help books. As for their Indian counterparts, its spiritual component threw them out of gear. That's when Lata chose to self-publish, opting for an additional CD voice to share her inner world as therapy with those rendered strangers to the written word.

Lata Mani's testament to the seeking human spirit is a rich lode in our dispiriting times. As we trek her routes to realisation, we turn sudden corners to meet ourselves face-to-face. That's a leaf of individuation within the cosmic whole that's worth preserving in the scrapbook of our lives.

*Interleaves: Ruminations on Illness and Spiritual Life*, available in a paperback edition and on CDs, was released at a well attended interactive session with the author, at the Strand Book Stall, Bangalore, on June 14.

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## Bookworm's delight

**I**T IS NOT easy to find one's way to the Kendriya Sadan in Koramangala's 2nd Block, and even after locating this CPWD-owned multi-storey central government building, finding the publications division within, takes some effort. It is on the first floor in the F wing, where a book exhibition opened on June 11.

The display is in their office premises, and no attempt is made to entice the visitor. The books are generally in glass fronted 9 ft cup-

boards after a contest was held in 1995. The superb pictures from all over India have also short biodata of the photographers and this 1997 publication costs Rs 920. And there are some other affordable gems: Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya's *India's Craft Tradition*, a 1980 book has been reprinted recently and costs Rs 35.

H Bhisam Pal's hardback, *Handicrafts of Rajasthan*, has a map, impressive colour plates as well as black and white photographs,

Publications Division. Ticking those that would be of interest, one can ask where in the cupboards they are to be found for browsing before deciding. The personnel are quite happy to find them and bring them to you as you go around.

There is even a CD Rom, one on Mahatma Gandhi. The only other CD Rom, titled 2000 India, was produced by them at the beginning of the millennium, but it was not in stock. It is important to

## Deck y

**T**HE HOME textile market in India has got yet another member-Virudhunagar Textile Mills Limited (VTML), part of the Madurai-based Thiagarajar Mills Limited. VTML announced the launch of its yarn-dyed international designer-wear bed linen, pillow covers and cushion covers. The product is available at leading stores like Drapes Avenues, Nalli Arcade and Bombay Stores in Bangalore. To create more visibility VTML is also talking to a num-