



Matter of pact

Akhila Seetharaman finds that Lata Mani's new book is all about interrelatedness.

Take it or leave it At Avenue Road everything is interconnected, through a confluence of trade, people, buildings and trees

Flesh out the old cliché “everything is connected” and the world comes alive in the most unexpected ways. In the series of essays that make up *The Integral Nature of Things: Critical Reflections on the Present*, feminist historian and cultural critic Lata Mani takes the reader on a quest to join the dots by breaking down socially constructed hierarchies, understanding neoliberal globalisation for what it is, and appreciating the “is-ness” of things and people. In an email interview, Mani spoke to *Time Out* about her forthcoming book.

Your work straddles several conventional categories. It juxtaposes cultural critique and social commentary with insights about spirituality and the nature of life. How would you summarise the book?

The form of the book derives from the central problem it addresses: the interrelatedness of things and the way our language, concepts and terms of reference limit our ability to notice this critical fact, let alone take account of it sufficiently. We have come to think of knowledge as a set of procedures that brings the world to order. This view of knowledge as mastery is tied to the idea that it cognitively captures the world for humans. I explore what it would mean to step aside from this notion. The book addresses concrete issues: urban life, technology, advertising, politics, sex, the impact of neoliberal globalisation. It makes its case gradually, cumulatively.

You expand the definition of knowledge to refer to a communion with everything around us. How does an awareness of the

relatedness of everything change the way we know and do things?

Communion connotes an intimate, attentive and reciprocal interchange. It also carries the sense of things as alive; their existence is intrinsically meaningful, not reducible to their value to humans. It positions you as a learner and a cohabiter of the universe. One is not simply someone seeking cognitive control over phenomena. Those so-called objects of knowledge are also teaching you. To commune with one's surroundings is to approach it in a spirit very different from an orientation that reduces land to real estate or forest to timber. It is to commit to thinking about the consequences of our actions for all of nature, something discouraged by the logic of the market which is the secular religion of our times.

A recurring theme in the book is about stepping out of the “delirium of excess,” which characterises modern life under neoliberal globalisation and recognising the value of the quotidian, repetitive, natural. Why is this important?

The logic of the market dominates contemporary urban life. Given that capitalism requires perpetual growth, it strives to bring all aspects of daily life within its ambit. Pleasure is increasingly aligned with consumption and consumption becomes a dimension of identity. It is a process without terminus. One can never have enough, be enough; there is always something else to be experienced. Part of what keeps the desire-dissatisfaction dyad alive is the idea that the everyday is repetitive and boring; that excitement is by definition

an escape from the ordinary and routine. To reclaim these rhythms then is to resist and defy market rationale, to unmask the miasma of excitement as proposed by it and in doing so re-enchant everyday life.

In one of the chapters, you take the reader to Bangalore's Avenue Road for a guided observation of the interconnectedness and interdependence of trees, people, buildings, commerce, past and present. What lessons does this old street offer at a time when the city is under pressure to become “global”?

The global city in our context evokes a certain ideal of urbanism (skyline, infrastructure, entertainment, etc). It has been radically remaking our urban centres through processes indifferent to their histories and presents. To it Avenue Road would be a mere relic of the past, an obstacle to be overcome. I wanted to step away from such parrying in abstractions to sketch in some aspects of what shapes life there: the entrepreneurial ingenuity, flexibility, solidarity and yes, indifference and hierarchies. Without romanticising its ethos I wanted to point to its accommodative culture and to the shared sense of social obligation that prevails. Places like Avenue Road hold up a mirror to what is lost as we celebrate the fiction of an entrepreneurialism that elevates individualism and self-sufficiency and overlooks the interdependencies that underwrite individual success.

Integral Nature of Things: Critical Reflections on the Present. Routledge, ₹450. Lata Mani's book will be launched on Fri Feb 22 at 6.30pm at the Bangalore International Centre, 4th Main Road, 2nd Stage, Domlur (2535 9680).