

## ENCOUNTER

LATA MANI

Lata Mani was driving to work at the University of California, Davis, on a winter morning in 1993, when a stolen Pepsi truck hit her car on the freeway and changed her life forever. This historian's 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India' is recognised as a seminal work. Her new book 'Interleaves: Ruminations on Illness and Spiritual Life', is on her experiences in the past eight years. Published by the 45-year-old author, it was launched in Bangalore this week. Excerpts from a conversation:

### How did *Interleaves* emerge?

The book represents my life in the wake of a near-death experience. I suffered a closed head injury. I entered a long phase of deep illness from which I am only just begin-

ning to emerge. I found there was very little language available that would facilitate communication between myself and the people around me, about what it felt to be ill, because primarily in our society illness is seen as an interruption, a rupture or a catastrophe.

I started *Interleaves* as a way to put into words the richness of my inner experience. And as I kept doing it, it became clear to me that it would be helpful others who had undergone a sudden transformation in life.

### Was the process of writing very difficult?

I started the book (by speaking into a tape recorder) about four years into the experience. The mind started to come back and there was a desire to communicate where I



had been and how my life had changed. The book deals with not just illness, but the spiritual opening that came with it. If there is little language for illness,

there is even less language to talk about spiritual experiences.

### You have dedicated the book to Devi Amma. Who is she and how did she come to you?

Devi Amma is an ancient name for Divine Mother. As I lay in bed, unable to even understand what had happened to me I felt a very strong loving presence. The Presence, which still continues, was telling me that this period of my

life was an invitation to die out of an old self, to allow myself to be remade by this experience.

### You are a Marxist-Feminist historian. Both ideologies provide the analytical framework for understanding social phenomena. Does your spiritual opening render any of these descriptions invalid?

I was deeply formed by Marxism and Feminism. Marxism and Feminism now occupy a more local space in my orientation towards life. They have offered critical tools which I continue to use to comprehend social structure and processes. However, rather than seeing them as worldviews that were self-sufficient, I use their concepts to understand social arrangements. My understanding of the world is now premised on a differ-

ent view of life.

### How did you apply them to your situation?

These tools were very crucial in understanding what society thinks about illness. I was being treated as a completely different person. I had no temptation to personalise it. That inclination came from my training. But for tools to cope with dramatic life change, pain etc., I needed to turn elsewhere.

### Does your spiritual understanding transform these ideologies?

I feel that at root we ill-treat each other on account of greed, rage, hatred from a sense of "not-enoughness"... These are at the root of why people behave in an adharmic fashion. When you look at collective expressions of not enoughness, these can take the

form exclusionism, marginalisation. All religions preach "pure love", but that is not what we see in practice. I feel that I am able to look deeper into the root causes of suffering than Marxism may have lead me to. But I would turn to Marxism and Feminism to understand the social expressions that are the result of the individual and collective sense of not-enoughness. **What are your plans?**

I'm still recovering. I can continue to dictate and write. I also hope to work with people who are severely ill, disabled or dying, drawing on my experience. I have done it in a small way — given my health constraints — in the US with stroke and head injury patients.

— Sanghamitra Chakraborty

# 'Illness is seen as an interruption, rupture or catastrophe'