

## SacredSecular: Contemplative Cultural Critique



Lata Mani was born in Bangalore, but has only lived here since the late 1990s. In a conversation with **Lawrence Liang** about her new book, *SacredSecular*, she discusses secularism, the energy of this city and her relationship with Bangalore's ecosystem.

**Normally the domain of the sacred and the secular are seen to be distinct, but you have chosen to use the compound word SacredSecular.**

I use SacredSecular as a compound word to signal the central argument of the book which is about the indivisibility of matter and spirit. As soon as we use the word spirit we are led to contemplate the issue of tradition, its history, its contradictions, its complexity, its social institutions, and the cultural practices that embody, reproduce and constantly rearticulate tradition. That's one axis of concern in this book. But as soon as you use the word "matter" you are immediately led to consider the material world in all its aspects – from the everyday to the broader questions which assume poignancy at a time like this one when there has been rapid

transformation of our cities. The compound word was to signal what the book tries to demonstrate, namely, that spirit and matter are indivisible.

**Specifically in relation to the Indian experience, the word secular has come to play a particular role, and that is in relation to religious extremism. How do you bridge these two allegedly separate worlds?**

We are at an impasse: a liberal secular mode of arguing against religious extremism has run its course. It remains a valid response but is unable to include vast numbers of people who are also against religious extremism but are uncomfortable with not having a language that includes their faith. Current political rhetoric does not enable us to integrate in our search for justice a notion of ethics born of the best of the different faith traditions in the sub-continent and combine it with the best of the secular traditions which are also a vital part of our intellectual legacy. I do not see one as being indigenous and the other as being foreign, one as authentic and the other as an imposition. At this point we have a rich fluency in secular discourse but as intellectuals we have lost our capacity to be as fluent in our sacred traditions.

We are now called upon to cultivate that fluency; it may require the invention of new words, new modes of expression. Like our secular inheritance, the sacred is a legacy with enormous potential for contemporary reworking. We need not see the sacred as fixed because, like the secular, it is simply a structure which contains potentiality. It is up to us to develop those potentialities in ways that speak to our moment. And we will turn to the sacred in ways that are old and there will be ways that we articulate the sacred that will bear the impress of the present.

**What does it mean to practice spirituality in a city like Bangalore? How do you find stillness amidst such flux?**

It is a challenge, but not insurmountable. As I have argued in my piece on trash, we could consider heaps of garbage as monuments that ask us to reflect on our consumption habits – what we consume, how we consume it and what we do with what we have consumed. If every pile of trash poses such fundamental existential questions we could equally say that the sensory overload that has come to characterise our cities is akin to a bell of mindfulness. What do I mean by that? It seems to me that we witness a paradox: on the one hand a hunger for speed, whether it is the speed of the internet or a motorbike going from zero to sixty in X number of seconds. At the same time there is a great desire for stillness, spas, people doing Yoga etc.

If we look closely at what is being reached for in this seeming paradox we realise that the conditions in which everyday life is lived require us to pay less and less attention to that which enables everyday life, our bodies, our embodied nature and various things that actually make it possible for us to live at all. These are the very things we are being asked to treat as something we can change, speed up or slow down as needed, in accordance with the logic of the market, capital, etc. It is because of this that we hunger for speed and stillness. Now speed and stillness are not necessarily opposites; whirling dervishes manifest stillness at the point when they are spinning the fastest. However, it is only by being thoroughly integrated in a bodily sense that they are able to experience stillness in action. We experience stillness and action as opposed to one another because we are being required to undertake action in conditions, and in ways, that require us to

flee the body as a material site.

This means that if we wish to pursue stillness in a city like Bangalore, we create the conditions in our everyday life where we are able to literally stop, listen, feel, see and notice the way distraction is the norm, whether it is the million advertisements cluttering our computer screens or the ticker tape of information running along the bottom of our televisions. We are currently required to cultivate lack of concentration and focus. Stillness would require a simplification of our sensory world. This would lead us to experience the material world more fully. There are only so many things that we can do at one time. Just because a machine can do many things does not mean that we can actually experience everything that a machine may make it possible for us to experience simultaneously. There are limits.

**In your article on the miasma of globalisation, you say that cities are not brands, they are living entities, eco systems in which humans have evolved modes of living. What is your relationship to Bangalore's eco system?**

It has been a love affair with the energy of this place. I was born here but I never lived here. I chose to return at the end of the '90s and upon arriving I felt at home. I have tried to cultivate a conscious relationship to the city. How can I be a witness in this gold rush period? I lived for 20 years in the San Francisco Bay Area where the long term implications of the developmental path that we are embracing with such enthusiasm are showing their more complex consequences. I feel I am placed in a position to notice, learn, listen and seek language for what I experience.

*Routledge, Rs 295. Lata Mani will participate in a dramatic reading and discussion on Sun, Jan 18. See Poetry & reading in Books.*

**Inflation watch** Men's haircut at local barber: Aug 2008 Rs 50; Jan 2009 Rs 70. At Bounce: Aug 2008 Rs 640; Jan 2009 Rs 675.