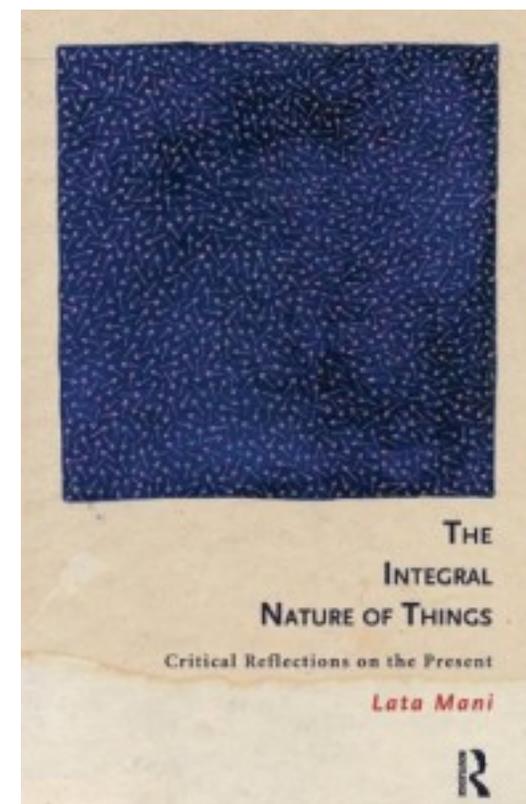


# *The Integral Nature of Things: Critical Reflections on the Present* by Lata Mani

by Leela Fernandes  
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**Review by Leela Fernandes: Lata Mani, *The Integral Nature of Things: Critical Reflections on the Present*. New Delhi: Routledge Press, 2013. ISBN 0415831385.**

Lata Mani's *The Integral Nature of Things* presents a series of meditations that gently unsettles the terrain of conventional secular discourse that has come to shape much of feminist, post-colonial academic thought in the twenty-first century. It invites the reader to contemplate the nature of knowledge about the world through reflections on a wide-ranging array of socio-cultural practices, lived experiences, theoretical quandaries and metaphysical questions. At its heart, it weaves together vignettes that juxtapose various forms of alienation with possibilities of returning to a way of being that rests on relationships that are holistically connected. Episodes of cultural, social and spatial alienation associated with economic neoliberalism co-mingle with the metaphysics of nature and moments of a deeper sense of connection – a sense of connection that Mani would like the reader to consider as integral to the nature of the world.

Capturing the meaning of a book like *The Integral Nature of Things* is not an easy task for a book review. For readers looking for recognizable signposts it contains many discussions of the debilitating effects of neo-liberalism in India whether in terms of familiar spatialized socio-economic changes in urban neighborhoods, the effects of middle class consumerism and the deleterious effects of some forms of technology. These writings do not delve into such issues in sustained depth and will either be unsurprising to those who have studied such phenomena or leave readers wanting more exposition and analysis. Similar criticisms could be raised with varied discussions of religious nationalism and globalization. Such a critical approach to the book could be one avenue of engagement, but one that would miss the deeper significance of the endeavor it is undertaking. The book is asking the reader to consider a different mode of knowledge about the world – one that is embodied in both the substantive reflections in the book and in the nature of Mani's writing. The reader is given the task of responding to this request by learning to read – and to perceive – differently.

Mani asks the reader to engage with the various issues she addresses with a sense of intimacy. This sense of intimacy is expressed through a mode of writing that draws the reader in through simple, everyday anecdotes of personal experience and through micro-examples of broader socio-economic and political processes. However, the invitation to intimacy is not an easy return to a narration of personal experience or a throwback to a confessional mode of anthropological writing. As Mani notes, “intimacy is a quality of an interaction, the nature of our awareness, the intent with which we approach that which is before us” (62). It is this quality of awareness that Mani’s writing evokes and it is a request for an intimacy in our practices of reading that is infused throughout the book. Mani writes through and about connection and interdependence. There is a subtle invitation to the reader to listen with this sense of connection that permeates the book.

Embedded in Mani’s writing is a deeper, sophisticated critique of and alternative to current understandings of the relationship between knowledge and power. She explicitly points to some of the limitations of post-structuralist approaches to knowledge production where the “celebration of fragmentation, marginality, discontinuity, and non-narrative forms has made it indifferent to ideas, as also evidence, of wholeness, continuity, stability, and to linear narratives that express these dimensions of social experience” (81). Her argument is not premised on a rejection of the deconstructive insights that have helped us understand the politics of knowledge production. Rather, she points to the ways in which post-structuralism has become trapped by its own disciplinary practices that “take as real the disarticulation of the integral” (90). For Mani, the import of post-structuralist theory rests in its ability to serve as a “ground-clearing exercise” (83) that can lead to a reconception of ideas such as interconnection and holism and the interrelatedness of “concepts, identities and narratives” (83). Mani’s idea of the “integral” nature of things seeks to engage in this project of rethinking ideas of wholeness and interrelationship.

Mani’s reconception of wholeness and connection draws on religious and spiritual ideas and practices. Her turn to these sources of understanding will unsettle any audience that presumes a secular foundation of knowledge. She writes of her insights gained through meditation and takes seriously religious concepts such as *dharma*. While, there is an emerging body of thought on the idea of “post-secularism,” such approaches often gain academic (and political) legitimacy by discursive frames that are restricted to criticisms of the limitations and Eurocentric roots of modern conceptions of “the secular”. While moments of such criticism surface in Mani’s work, her concern is more with alternative understandings of the world that can be gained from religious thought and practice. Academic discussions of religion and spirituality within progressive fields such as post-colonial and feminist studies are still largely stunted. Religious and spiritual beliefs are fenced off in acceptable territories – often when posed as a critique of Eurocentric thought or as the basis for marginalized communities’ projects of self-identification. In hegemonic feminist thought, for instance, this is often projected onto “Muslim women” and “indigenous communities.” Taking religious thought and spiritual beliefs as a serious entry point for rethinking politics, justice and philosophy more often than not sparks unease if not outright prejudice in many secular progressive academic and activist environments. In that sense, Mani’s writing undertakes the risk of breaking with such secular disciplinary practices.

Mani herself poignantly discusses such risk in one essay in which she recounts an experience of participating in a panel on the impact of fundamentalism and communalism in Bengaluru (Bangalore), India. Mani describes the experience of structuring her comments ‘as a prayer’ and the resistance that this provokes. The translator declines to translate her comments into Kannada (and a new translator volunteers) and members of the audience are steeped in discomfort with her comments. In both form and substance, her comments challenge the secular assumptions of progressive discourse (whether academic or activist) whose “incomprehension of religion makes them vulnerable to wooden interpretations of it” (194). Mani’s depiction of the dynamics following her presentation evokes a striking parallel to situations in which raising issues of racism spark a sense of discomfort and closure of engagement in audiences that are shaken from their normalized frameworks of racialized worlds. Or as Mani puts it in a gentler fashion, “And like friends who have no intention of forsaking each other we lingered afterwards, drinking tea and saying we must talk more about all of this at some point, knowing fully well that it was unlikely that we

would” (197).

The invocation of religion does not of course mean that the terms that Mani sets forth are sacred and therefore beyond engagement or critical discussion. Her discussions of various concepts often draw on Hindu philosophical practices and traditions without, for instance, addressing issues that may arise when different theologies present different visions of wholeness. Her discussion of dharma and the law does not for instance does not address what it would mean to ground conceptions of justice or ethical practice in a single religion – one that has a dominant position in contemporary India. Her brief references to “Judeo-Christian” thought often also present simplified understandings of the variety of practices and beliefs within Judaism and Christianity. However, the book opens up rather than forecloses discussion of such questions. There is nothing strident in the tone or discussion of such issues in the work. It is a book that is thought-provoking, modest and insightful.

The book is an invitation for a conversation – for words “to embrace, mingle, recombine, in the process of generating fresh meaning and new directions” (190). Regardless of one’s secular or religious dispositions, *The Integral Nature of Things* asks us to consider whether we can practice (in simple ways) the alternative ways of being and knowing that our more majestic calls for justice and transformation cry out for.

**Tags: colonial history, knowledge, religion**

Leela Fernandes, Glenda Dickerson Collegiate Professor of Women’s Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA

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