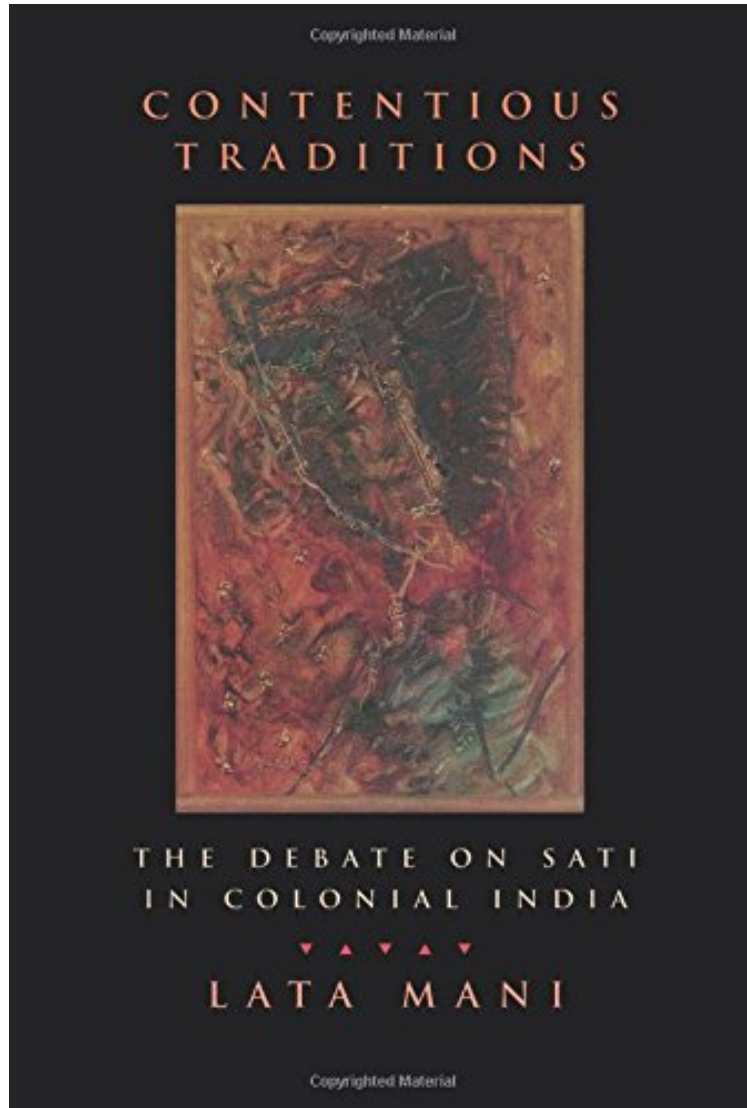


Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India

Lata Mani

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Lata Mani : Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy dheepa sundaramexcellent modern piece on sati.7 of 10 people found the following review helpful. an important intervention for the specialist and non specialist alikeBy R. GovindThis book is important not only for those interested in 'sati' (whatever their motives might be) but also for anyone interested in exploring the difficult problems that confront the historian in her task. By carefully examining the

debates around sati it argues, among other things, that the colonial state and many nationalists shared the same grounds. Although ostensibly about women, Mani shows that the real issue was about the nature of Indian tradition. I would ignore the above review. (only something 'definitive' can be tempered. to temper -- to modify, to soften, to tone down. and anyone who has read the book will know that Mani is on the 'side' of those who have tempered conventional narratives. 1765 (diwani rights) is of course again critical for anyone who knows any indian history)13 of 38 people found the following review helpful. The most dreadful tripe!By Nicholas CorwinWhile the subject matter is certainly important, this book throws little or no light upon it. In every way, Mani's writing exemplifies all that is wrong with academic and (pseudo) intellectual writing today: mind-numbing, dull prose, unnecessary prolixity, sentences larded up with undefined, ambiguous jargon, and countless ipse dixit assertions. In short, the work is unreadable. The author manages to offend every single precept of good writing so singlehandedly that one is almost tempted to wonder whether in fact she was perpetrating a hoax. If such is not the case, Mani needs to read Orwell's 1946 gem, "Politics and the English Language." Right now. Several times. Besides inflicting the most tortured syntax on her readers, Mani also manages to string words together so that they lack absolutely any substantive meaning whatsoever. Subjects and verbs are juxtaposed seemingly at random: quite illustrative are the last two sentences of the book's opening paragraph:"No doubt the definitive status accorded to particular dates and events has been tempered by a reconceptualization of history as a set of processes that are uneven, contingent and contested, rather than an objective and objectifiable narrative of events. Even so, 1765 finalizes a crucial shift in the activities of the British trading company in the landmass that later assumed the name India."Where to begin?! As Orwell so vividly put it, writing of this sort consists not of words used for their concrete meaning, but rather set phrases, tacked together like a prefab structure. How can a "reconceptualization" "temper" a "definitive status"? That simply makes no sense. Why the hair-splitting between "objective" and "objectifiable"? Note the dodge of using the passive voice right from the start--"has been tempered". By whom? Those who don't agree with you? Dead white males? Say so! For that matter, what exactly is an "objectifiable narrative"? Essentially, there is no such thing. Perhaps I am too much of a dullard to understand what "uneven, contingent and contested" processes are. Contingent upon what, exactly, contested by whom? The second sentence, mercifully enough, is somewhat shorter, but equally insipid. How can a span of time, e.g., a year (1765) "finalize" anything? A "year" cannot "do" anything as an active agent. It may symbolize or represent something (in which case the verb reflects human action, i.e., thought), but it cannot act on its own. For that matter, "finalize," a clumsy transmutation of a noun into a verb (reflecting the author's failure to come up with a real verb, such as "crowns" or even "concludes") is also bad English, although by now it has largely seeped its way into our debased tongue, so perhaps I ought to let that one slide.And Mani somehow packed all that drivel into a single paragraph! Imagine trying to slog one's way through hundreds of similar pages. People who write in this reprehensible fashion do so for one reason: to obfuscate. The desire to do so usually springs from one or two motives: a) to disguise the fact that one has essentially nothing to say; or b) to disguise the fact that one's argument or thesis is pure bunkum, by bombarding readers so relentlessly with doubletalk that they throw their hands up in despair and cede everything to the author rather than trying to grapple with the text. One may or may not harbor an interest in sati and subaltern studies. Chances are, given Mani's palaver, that her arguments are flimsy and specious; but in any case, nobody will ever know for certain, no matter how much he or she slogs through this ghastly piece of gibbering claptrap. One cannot but conclude that Mani, a freelance writer, intended it that way, essentially to overwhelm her academic audiences with the verbal equivalent of a shock and awe attack.

Contentious Traditions analyzes the debate on sati, or widow burning, in colonial India. Though the prohibition of widow burning in 1829 was heralded as a key step forward for women's emancipation in modern India, Lata Mani argues that the women who were burned were marginal to the debate and that the controversy was over definitions of Hindu tradition, the place of ritual in religious worship, the civilizing missions of colonialism and evangelism, and the proper role of the colonial state. Mani radically revises colonialist as well as nationalist historiography on the social reform of women's status in the colonial period and clarifies the complex and contradictory character of missionary writings on India. The history of widow burning is one of paradox. While the chief players in the debate argued over the religious basis of sati and the fine points of scriptural interpretation, the testimonials of women at the funeral pyres consistently addressed the material hardships and societal expectations attached to widowhood. And although historiography has traditionally emphasized the colonial horror of sati, a fascinated ambivalence toward the practice suffused official discussions. The debate normalized the violence of sati and supported the misconception that it was a voluntary act of wifely devotion. Mani brilliantly illustrates how situated feminism and discourse analysis compel a rewriting of history, thus destabilizing the ways we are accustomed to look at women and men, at "tradition," custom, and modernity.

"Examines the documents of the colonial bureaucracy, the writings of the nineteenth-century indigenous male elite, the journals and publications of missionaries, and numerous European eyewitness accounts. She asks why the British first loudly denounced it, then covertly sanctioned it, and then officially banned it. . . . Contentious Traditions shows how

divided the colonial bureaucrats were on the political costs of intervening in sati, how the grounds shifted in the arguments that the nineteenth-century Bengali reformer Rammonhun Roy made against sati in response to colonial pronouncements. how the Baptist missionaries took very different stances in addressing British and Indian audiences, and burning ricocheted between horror and fascination. . . . In citing the gruesome evidence that many satis were neither "voluntary" nor painless, and by assuming that the material causes for many satis make them by definition non-religious, Lata Mani discounts the religious ideology that might have motivated either the woman herself or the people forcing her to do it, or both."--Times Literary Supplement

From the Inside Flap"An important and disturbing book. Lata Mani has reopened the archives on widow burning in colonial India. Her meticulous reading of contemporary texts . . . is exemplary for its conceptual sophistication. Unsettling and illuminating, this is feminist scholarship at its best."Ranjit Guha, founding editor Subaltern Studies"Mani's argument that the terms 'tradition' and 'modernity' are inscribed and reinscribed in the bodies of colonized women has forever changed our understandings of patriarchy, nationalism, and colonialism, and indeed redefined the conditions for 'knowing' with respect to these contexts."Lisa Lowe, author of Immigration Acts"Lata Mani's brilliant and persuasive analysis of official, native and missionary writings on sati in colonial India makes for a new beginning in contemporary analysis of colonial discourse. This is the book that many have waited for. A landmark publication in several fields at once: modern South Asian history, feminist critiques of colonial discourse, and cultural studies."Dipesh Chakrabarty, University of Chicago