

Review of Lamb, S. (2000). *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes: Aging, Gender, and Body in North India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

by Rachel Girmus

This ethnography is based on the research of anthropologist Sarah Lamb, who spent eighteen months in the village of Mangaldihi in West Bengal between the years of 1989 and 1990. Her focus is on “aging, gender, and the making and unmaking of persons” (2000: xi). The book is divided into three parts, alternately investigating the dynamics of persons and families, aging and dying, and gendered transformations that come with age in this Hindu community. In particular, the book provides insight into the complexities of the lives of women.

On the recommendation of a male friend from Calcutta, Lamb stayed with his relatives and began the process of living as a Bengali woman by learning from the environs of her daily life. Throughout her stay she had uncountable conversations and took copious field notes. Much of the book is based on direct personal communication and experiences, but she also has a thorough knowledge of other ethnographic literature on the area and frequently references other academic and artistic sources for literature review or to clarify or reinforce her own findings throughout the book.

Lamb is attempting to explain how the villagers’ cultural perceptions of aging affect their gender and social relations from earliest childhood until after death. Lamb most heavily emphasizes the Mangaldihi conceptualization of the bonds between a person and all the surrounding people, objects, and locations to which he or she shares connection and affection. These bonds, conceptualized as the ‘ties’ of *maya*, ‘affection’ or ‘illusion’, are what make and unmake persons and affect all aspects of life in Mangaldihi, including social interactions, concepts of purity, ceremony and ritual, familial relations, happiness and grief. Sarah Lamb specifically investigates how the ties of *maya* influence social norms and behaviors as people age and prepare themselves for death. She describes this as a precarious time when *maya* must be cut to free the aged from their earthly affections that may cause them to be unable

to find peace after death, but also a time when it is the most difficult to cut the relational ties that have become strong over the bonds of a lifetime.

At the beginning of the book, Lamb describes how *maya* is built and maintained. The majority of the book is spent describing how the elderly in the village approach the process of cutting *maya* through rituals of cooling, drying, and moving to the social periphery of family and home life in anticipation of death. From a gendered perspective, this process is different for women, especially widows, as their bodies are perceived as more 'hot,' 'open,' and vulnerable to relational ties. This book is important to read because while many studies on South Asia have been done on superficial cultural aspects like observable funeral rituals and caste untouchability, this research attempts to explain the underlying cultural assumptions and perceptions that reveal the reasons for such rigorous adherence to those behaviors and rituals.

The book was written to promote understanding of particular cultural concepts, and meets its aims, providing chapters that specifically address personhoods, family moral systems, generational differences and conflicts, loosening the ties one ages, dealing with mortality, death rituals, transformations of gender that come with age, and the complexities of widowhood, although Lamb could have further explained particular experiences of featured individuals. While the book often seems repetitive, Lamb states that one of our scholarly aims is to "complicate our understandings" of cultural structures (2000: 197), which involves the understanding of multiple, competing social ideologies and perceptions. Repetition seems necessary to address the many shades of meaning that structure and influence Mangaldihi culture. Lamb also seems to subtly but nevertheless unnecessarily express her opinion of certain practices throughout the reading, which can prove distracting.

This book would best serve a scholarly audience and would be used most appropriately in an anthropology, health, or cultural understanding course, as it is a product of ethnographic field research and reads as an academic work.