

# Indic scholar Mandakranta Bose lives on in her work

JULIE BANERJEE MEHTA

Scholar Mandakranta Bose passed away in Vancouver on September 10.

The maple leaves were just turning when we walked to the building of the Institute of Asian Research, with the English Bay right under the cliffs of the University of British Columbia (UBC), to deliver lectures on our books on Cambodian history and culture, to which we had been invited by its director, professor Pitman Potter. As my partner Harish and I completed our talks and were heading out, we saw a most petite and elegant sari-clad lady carrying an armload of books to her car.

Thus began a 26-year close association with professor Mandakranta Bose, possibly the most scintillating scholar of Indic studies with a dazzling array of honours and degrees from Somerville College, Oxford University, in Sanskrit textual studies and the performing arts of India. As with most rockstars in their fields, it was not just the brand or the label that endeared her to us both. It was the relentless help she offered without being asked that set her apart as a mentor extraordinaire.

The next day, we met her husband, professor Tirthankar Bose, a renowned English professor at Simon Fraser University. They invited us to their home on a quaint, leafy street. Over many cups of tea in their green backyard with its English garden, I talked with her about the Cambodian *Ramayana* and my years of research, which she was very interested in.

During that week, we met again at the Bose residence. We also met their charming daughter, Sarika, who is also a professor of English. Their son Pablo, also a young academic, has done them proud.

Professor Mandakranta was curious, inclusive and welcoming in her sharing of comparative research between the *Ramayanas* of India and Southeast Asia.

● Julie Banerjee Mehta is an academic, author, and literary columnist for *t2, The Telegraph*



Mandakranta Bose

Her ebullient personality and extraordinary generosity came through again within a few months of that first meeting, when she invited me to speak at the International Ramayana Conference at the Centre for India and South Asia Research at the UBC.

At that conference on the UBC campus, I witnessed professor Mandakranta's pragmatism, wisdom and management chutzpah.

Minutes before I was to present my paper on the Rituals in Cambodian Classical Dance, my carousel of slides was toppled over by mistake by a fellow presenter. I felt the earth move since I was the youngest independent scholar amongst a hall full of professors. A young professor from an American university rushed to help slot my slides back in. Professor Mandakranta remained very calm, put her arm around me and said "these things happen to the best of us." After a 10-minute delay, I made my presentation, with the carousel cooperating nicely.

Within a few weeks, she contacted me and constantly reminded me about turning in my paper and included my contribution in the acclaimed anthology *Ramayana Revisited* (Oxford University Press, London and New York: 2004). I learnt from her the alacrity and commitment to turning good conference papers into published anthologies that add so much value to a young scholar's portfolio.

Any student of mine from the University of Toronto, Jadavpur University or Loreto College making their way to North America, whom I put in touch with Professor Mandakranta, was overwhelmed by her hospitality and kindness. She made time to meet, feed and guide them.

We kept up the friendship over the oceans, and the Boses visited us in Calcutta at my parents' home and in Toronto, when we taught at the University of Toronto. The last time the Boses visited Calcutta, we missed them, being away from the city. I will always feel guilty that I could not fulfil my last tryst with her.

Professor Mandakranta studied Sanskrit and Hindu religious texts (*Smṛti* and *Mīmāṃsā*) in Calcutta, comparative literature in Vancouver, earned her doctorate from Oxford in Sanskrit textual studies in the classical performing arts of India, including the *Dharmasastras*, the Hindu religious tradition, the *Ramayana*, which she had been researching since the early 1960s, as well as Hindu laws and practices of religious and social conduct, and medieval and modern Bengali literature.

Especially well recognised is her work on textual criticism and the preparation of Sanskrit texts from very early to medieval times. Her many publications, both scholarly articles and books, cover all these fields. A recently edited volume is *The Goddess* (Oxford University Press, 2018), while her latest work is *Women in the Hindu World* (Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, 2023). Perhaps where she stayed most current was in her persistence in finding new ways to interrogate and present the position of women in the Indic epics and discussions on the Divine feminine.

Focusing her research on early Sanskrit texts as well as drawing upon later sources in Bengali, she taught religious and gender studies at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. She was a former director of the Centre for India and South Asia Research at UBC and an Emeritus Professor there. She was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain.

Professor Mandakranta will be remembered for living her dream of straddling both worlds — East and West — and carving out a luminous path allowing Indian philosophy and mythology to be both alluring and accessible.