

Ratula Banerjee Sen (1945-2020) IIT Kharagpur 1969 Architecture Obituary/Biography by Avijit Banerjee, Professor, Drexel

Ratula Banerjee Sen (b. 1945) suddenly and unexpectedly passed away in her sleep in Kolkata on April 13, 2020, following a cerebral stroke and subsequent cardiac arrest. She was the daughter of the late Dr. B. R. Sen, professor of Civil Engineering at IIT, Kharagpur and a granddaughter of the late Sri K. C. Dasgupta, the founder of Calcutta Chemical Company.

Ratula studied Architecture at IIT, Kharagpur and went to the Netherlands in 1968, as an architectural trainee. In Netherlands, she enrolled in the Doctoraal program in History of Art at the University of Amsterdam in 1969, specializing in South Asian Art. While a student, she was employed as an Assistant Curator at the Royal Tropical (Tropen) Museum, associated with the university. While employed, she was responsible for arranging several exhibitions on Asian art at Tropen. Ratula, formally trained in classical Hindustani vocal music, also arranged and sponsored several concert performances by prominent artists from the Indian subcontinent, such as Ustad Nazakat and Salamat Ali Khan, Ustad Vilayat Khan, the senior Dagar Brothers and many others, in the Netherlands, Germany, France, etc. She was a pioneer in introducing Indian classical music, (particularly the all-night concert format) to audiences in Europe. She also participated as an accompanying artist in concert performances by Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Yunus Hussain Khan, among others, throughout Europe and the USA.

Ratula was married to Avijit Banerjee in 1969 and moved to Newark, Delaware in the US, to be with her husband in 1975. The following year, she earned her Doctoral degree in History of Art from the University of Amsterdam. In 1982 she moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and retrained to be a respiratory therapist. Since 1985, she served as a licensed therapist in Louisiana, as well as in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, after her move to the Philadelphia region in 1987. She retired from work in 2011 and devoted her entire attention and energy to Hindustani classical music, which was her lifelong passion. For the past 33 years she lived in Media, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia, with her husband and three generations of their beloved pets, always treated as their children.

Ratula began her formal musical training when she was 16 years old with Ustad Naseem Hussain Khan of the Agra Gharana. She was subsequently formally initiated into this Gharana (as Ganda-bandh Shagird) by Ustad Ata Hussain Khan of Atrauli and continued her training with Ustad Yunus Hussain Khan of Delhi - the Khalifa of the Agra Gharana - starting in 1966, till his death in 1991. She was also trained in thumri, dadra, chaiti, kajri, hori, ghazal, etc. by Smt. Nayna Devi of Delhi. Since 1976, she continued to perform in concerts at various cities in the US. She has also taught vocal music to numerous children of her friends and acquaintances in this country. Throughout her life, Ratula was immersed in music. Her musical taste and talents spanned across a wide spectrum of various musical genres. Her musical versatility is reflected by the fact that she was the lead singer in the "Undergrads" a Western pop/jazz band in IIT, Kharagpur. In addition, she swept most of the prizes in practically all the competitive vocal music categories during the annual Spring Festivals at IIT.

Ratula was an extraordinary humanitarian, full of humor, love, and a deep abiding compassion for animals of all kinds. With her extraordinary aesthetic sensibilities and empathy for others, she has left an indelible mark on the lives of all that she came to know and embraced. She leaves behind her grieving husband, her beloved children (pets: Chico, Poochie and Fuzzy), her brother, Suprio, sister-in-law, Srabani, her nieces, nephews and their children, as well as countless friends and acquaintances throughout the world. She will be sorely missed. May her soul merge peacefully and effortlessly with the universal consciousness.