

IN MEMORIAM
Srabani Maitra (1972-2023)

Decolonising Transnational Adult Education

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In December 2023, the field of Adult Learning and Education lost one of its most promising scholars and staunch supporters. Srabani Maitra was the face of the best of the discipline – critical, praxis-oriented, equity-focused and global. We lost a dear friend, a close colleague, and an intellectual ally.

We met Srabani in the early 2000s at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (UofT) when she started her Doctoral Program with Kiran as her academic supervisor. At that time, Srabani was among the few international students on the 7th floor. During her program, she bonded with peer students given their common research interests and shared experiences of marginality. Among them were Bonnie and Hongxia, both postgraduate students at the time. We formulated a unique community of practice as we socialized, supported, and challenged one another as fellow students on our academic journeys. Not only did we take courses together, but we also started our reading groups trying to grapple with different bodies of scholarship, including institutional ethnography, a method of inquiry established by the late Dr. Dorothy Smith. We had our debates and differences. We also had our shared struggles. It is through our common efforts to understand these personal struggles that we embarked on their respective research journeys.

A pivotal point for us in our academic growth was when we joined Kiran, the late Dr. Roxana Ng, and a cohort of graduate students committed to “democratizing” workplace learning. Together, we not only conducted research, but we also ate lots of delicious food, learned about academia,

supervision and writing and, in the process, become lifelong friends. Collectively, we created a rare democratic, supportive space where faculty and students came together in a spirit of reciprocity and engagement. It is out of these joined research activities that Srabani, and her peers started emerging as researchers. For instance, out of the project, we wrote an ethnodrama, led by Dr. Jasjit Sangha, to bring to life the racialised working conditions for precarious workers in garment factories, supermarkets and call centres. When we performed it, Srabani brought great dramatic talent to the ethnodrama. We regularly would reminisce about how convincing she was as a cashier with repetitive strain injury.

Even in those early days, the seeds of all that she would later become were clearly visible. She picked difficult, thorny research questions and travelled in her scholarship through complicated terrains. She wrote her doctoral thesis on how the agency of women can be understood as a navigational process of learning, rather than a trait or a romanticized set of activities. Although it is impossible to discern this given the quality of her writing, she conducted her research for her doctoral thesis over six years, but actually wrote the thesis in six weeks, only because she received a prestigious postdoctoral scholarship with an acceptance deadline!

After graduating from the PhD she completed two postdoctoral research projects: a SSHRC Post-doctoral Fellowship at York University with Dr. Tania Das Gupta; and an Eyes High Post-doctoral scholarship at the Werklund School of Education in the University of Calgary, Canada, working with Dr. Yan Guo and Dr. Shibao Guo. Her postdoctoral research was even more impactful as she studied global contracting regimes, called bodyshopping. This phenomena remains hugely understudied because of the difficulty in gaining access to on the ground knowledge; Srabani seemed to be able to accomplish this with ease.

In 2017, Srabani joined the University of Glasgow in the School of Education as a Lecturer and found a second academic home. At the time of her death she had been promoted to Professor in Sociology of Adult and Vocational Education. In addition to her research and teaching, she put her energies into helping transform her institution into one which supports equity, inclusion and decolonisation. She brought a quiet leadership style to the university engendering deep respect, while treating others with the same. At the School of Education she taught, led funded research projects and was on the Senior Leadership Team. She was one of the Leads for the College of Social Sciences 'Addressing Inequalities' Interdisciplinary Research Theme, and a member of University's Regional Working Group for South and Central Asia.

Srabani was a scholar with a wide range of expertise across areas. Her research combined interdisciplinary theories and methodologies from sociology and education to focus on the issues of adult and vocational education, workplace skill training, transnational migration, race/racism and decolonisation. She was also active in disseminating research knowledge in alternative ways. In 2015, together with Dr. Tania Das Gupta, she produced a documentary film entitled *Journey to Find Myself Again: Experiences of South Asian Immigrant Women in the Canadian Labour Market*, which raises public awareness of the issues and struggles facing professional immigrants in Canada. It must be highlighted that Srabani's contributions to her academic fields spans different countries and areas. In Europe, since 2018, she was a Convenor for the Migration, Transnationalism and Racisms Network of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA).

It is rare for one individual to have such a far-reaching impact, let alone one who has lived as short a life as Srabani had. While we celebrate her remarkable achievements, we also feel sorry for the many students, colleagues and friends who have been denied the opportunity to engage and be transformed by her. We think and ruminate about all that Srabani could have, would have, but did not have the chance to do.