



THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE
Harvard University

Sanjay Datta



In 1940, within the city of Dhaka, India, Sanjay Datta, MBBS, Professor of Anesthesia and Division Director of Obstetric Anesthesia, Brigham and Women's Hospital, was born to a middle class family, where his salaried bank official father and his homemaker mother embraced simple living and an enduring respect for education and hard work.

Sanjay embodied this philosophy throughout life, as brightly as the orange marigold flowers of both Dhaka, where he was born, and of Calcutta, where he grew up, and as fiercely as these hometowns' commitment to their Bengali language and culture.

Although not learning English until secondary school was regretted as a personal barrier, this limitation became an element of Sanjay's remarkable success and a testament to his tenacity. With practice and discipline, Sanjay transformed hours of writing, re-writing and rehearsing, much with the assistance of his devoted wife Gouri, a psychiatrist and poet, into a nuanced understanding of the English language, with all its foibles in syntax and pronunciation.

The stability and strength of his partnership with Gouri, which grew from an arranged marriage of divergent personalities into a stronger bond of affection, humor, and respect, allowed his critical exuberance and joy for his work to flourish. Passionate, organized, punctual, and determined, Sanjay created and benefited from significant opportunities and a peripatetic education in India (MBBS, Calcutta University), England (Diplomate in Anaesthesia, Royal College of England), Canada (Research Fellow, McGill University) and the United States (Research Fellow, Harvard University).

Appointed as an Instructor in Anaesthesia at Harvard Medical School in 1975, Sanjay's prodigious basic and clinical research, clinical leadership, and international involvement enabled his matriculation in 1992 to Full Professor. During this transition, Sanjay served on a number of committees, including those within the American Society of Anesthesiologists, the New England Perinatology Society, the Association of University Anesthesiologists, and his major devotion, the Society for Obstetric Anesthesia and

*In tribute to their dedicated efforts to science and medicine, deceased members of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine (those at the rank of full or emeritus professor) receive a review of their life and contributions with a complete reflection, a **Memorial Minute**.*

Perinatology, a group for which he served as president in 1991.

The author of more than 175 scientific articles and scholarly contributions, Sanjay served on a number of editorial boards and originated four well-respected textbooks, which transformed obstetric patient safety and remain in press, some translated into a multitude of foreign languages: *Common Problems in Obstetric Anesthesia*, *Textbook of Obstetric Anesthesia*, *Obstetric Anesthesia Handbook*, and *Anesthetic and Obstetric Management of High-Risk Pregnancy*. The last textbook, in which authors from multiple branches of medicine integrated their often disparate, specialty-specific guidance into a singular whole, was of particular joy to Sanjay, as was his book “*Childbirth and Pain Relief*”, which was written for the lay public. Each of his books reflected Sanjay’s special reverence for childbirth---an event he considered to be one of the most important in any family’s life, and a special privilege for obstetric anesthesiologists to attend. The birth of his beloved daughter Nandini, now a teacher, transformed his life as well as his methods as an educator; an avid cheerleader for Nandini’s quotidian events, Sanjay would turn both mundane errands and international travel into a roving discussion on the virtues of grit and the value of a healthy lifestyle. Nandini possessed the singular ability to alter Sanjay’s regimented schedule, and add to it as well; in college, she would receive a call from him every evening. In his later years, despite his limited mobility, he would actively share his accumulated life lessons (and Kit Kat candy bars) with his two grandsons.

Within the Harvard Medical School community, Sanjay was best known as a respected and energetic teacher and researcher within the Brigham and Women’s Hospital, where as Director from 1988-2000 he created a world renowned division of obstetric anesthesia; he also served as the Chief of Obstetric Anesthesia for Clinical Teaching and Research at the Massachusetts General Hospital from 1994-1996. In a broader service to medicine, Sanjay conceived and developed the short handled laryngoscope, which remains a life-saving airway device favored by a spectrum of medical specialists (e.g., critical care intensivists, emergency room personnel, anesthesiologists, and paramedics) and found in emergency airway kits, anesthesia carts, and procedure rooms globally. The recipient of a number of research grants from industry, foundations, and governmental agencies, including the National Institutes of Health, Sanjay was also recognized with a number of awards, visiting professorships, and international lectureships; he was the first “August Bier” lecturer at the European Society of Anesthesia in 1997, and was presented the “Distinguished Service Award” by the Society for Obstetric Anesthesia and Perinatology in 2009.

Sanjay embraced his interests with passion and intensity of purpose, including listening to Indian and select pieces of classical music (Handel’s *Messiah* being a favorite), cheering for New England sports teams (New England Patriots), watching weekend political shows (and vociferously sharing his opinions), and traveling globally. He also succumbed to the frustrations of his many hobbies, each of which were subject to sequential experimentation, so as to devote his full attention. As a boy, he held soccer as an obsession, creating an extensive collection of newspaper clippings, facts, and figures on famous players. As a new husband, sailing became a captivation, encompassing lessons twice a week,

a library of books on techniques and maneuvers, and richly pigmented skin from long hours on the Charles River and in the Boston harbor. His time on the water gave way to the art of fishing, replete with an assortment of poles, lures, and “necessary” fishing gear, and then swimming, which by pure persistence, he created what a bevy of builders thought impossible: a small, indoor pool at his home, complete with a current powerful enough to yield exercise.

As his last hobby, golf demanded a significant amount of his time, and allowed a complete and full expression of Sanjay’s personality; he was simultaneously an extremely punctual and enthusiastic host, a creative score keeper, a sartorial partner (with an insistence of team members dressing identically during tournaments), an enthusiastic scout (perennially seeking new courses), and a creative thinker (who befriended greens keepers, not uncommonly with cigars, to allow earlier play). Sanjay also savored having family and friends together for a meal; colleagues and trainees were invited to his home for an annual dinner, where he served as both host and chef. His culinary skills were inherited from his mother, and were on display with his chicken curry (his life-time favorite meal was fish curry with mustard paste and turmeric on rice), shrimp with potatoes and cauliflower, and seasoned meat patties. With his untimely death in March 11, 2014, Sanjay’s life and lessons were celebrated by a global community of friends, mentees, students and colleagues, and family members, including, his wife, Gouri (Dasgupta) Datta; his daughter, Nandini Roy and her husband, Arjun; his grandchildren, Dhruv and Ravi Roy and his younger brother, Bejoy (Vijay) Datta, of India. With artful guidance by Gouri, the family selected a piece by Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali writer, poet, and Nobel Prize laureate in literature, to pay homage to his passing:

“Peace, my Heart,
Let the time for the parting be sweet.
Let it not be a death
But completeness.
Let love melt into memory
And pain into songs.
Let the flight through the sky end
In the folding of the wings over the nest.
Let the last touch of your hands be gentle
Like the flower of the night.
Stand still, O Beautiful End,
For a moment,
And say your last words in silence.
I bow to you
And hold up my lamp
To light you on your way.”

Respectfully Submitted,

Gouri Datta

Simon Gelman

Ron Hurley

Bhavani Kodali

Nandini and Arjun Roy

Lawrence Tsen

