

# A dotting father and an inspiring teacher

*Professor Dr Nurul Islam, the founding Chairman of the department of English at Jahangirnagar University and former Vice-Chancellor of Eastern University, died on November 22. In a career spanning about half a century, he touched many lives through his inspirational teaching and exemplary gentleness and kindness, and was deeply loved by his students and peers alike. Fahim Shahnoor (Rishi), the youngest son of Dr Islam, looks back at his father's illustrious life and career.*

Dr Islam's life began in the village of Waruk in Shahrasti, Chandpur. He was born to Sharifatunessa and Shah Golam Kader, a perennial Union Chairman and Member of about 30 years. He was the middle child among eight siblings in a close-knit family. His journey into academia started in the 1940s at Icchapura High School. He would walk about 6km daily there and back. During the rains, he would use a boat to cross the floodplains with his best friend Shafi (Dr ABM Shafiullah, now deceased) to get to school. He excelled as a student. He continued his studies at Chandpur College and then graduated with an MA in English from the University of Dhaka.

Always conscientious about not burdening others, he worked nights at an English newspaper to support himself while at DU. He obtained a British Council scholarship and went to the University of Leeds, UK for postgraduate studies at the height of the tumultuous 1960s. He had the time of his life there, and always cherished memories of the place, with friends on campus, at libraries and the student residence, Bodington Hall. After his stint at Leeds, he started his teaching career at Brahmanbaria College, then moved on to Eden College, and Chittagong College before joining Chittagong University.

In 1969, he married Sauda Akhter, whom he encouraged to become an accomplished academic of Bangla literature in her own right and attain her PhD. In 1970, he joined Jahangirnagar University as the founding Chairman and initial organiser of the department of English, where he would teach passionately for three decades. He obtained his PhD from the University of Ulster, UK on government scholarship in the 1970s. At Ulster, he made a couple of lifelong friends from different parts of the world, who were in touch with him even a month before his passing. His PhD thesis, published under the title *Graham Greene, An*



PHOTO: COURTESY

Professor Dr Nurul Islam, who passed away on November 22, 2017, was deeply loved by his students and peers alike.

*Inverted Humanist*, was an existentialist interpretation of the work of the great 20th-century English novelist Graham Greene.

He had the option to stay on in the UK as a teacher, and raise his young family there. But as he later related the story, he looked at the sparse trees around the British Library in London and found that he couldn't name the trees like he would be able to in his motherland; UK was not home. Also, he wanted his young children to be, as he put it in Bangla, "tog-boge" (full of energy) in the then-young country of Bangladesh. So, he returned to continue at JU.

In his personal life, he was a dotting father who raised his children in the bucolic surrounds of Jahangirnagar with his wife, and also assisted his relatives as much as he could. While at JU, he was

involved in many administrative, literary and organisational activities locally and nationally, including serving as the general secretary of the English Association of Bangladesh. He carried the spirit of the 1971 war of liberation in his heart and was the founding president of Bangabandhu Parishad in JU.

Incidentally, his elder brother, late Shamsul Haque, was a freedom fighter in Sector 2 and their ancestral home was targeted and ransacked by local razakars.

Dr Islam won various grants and accolades for his research work including a second scholarship from the British Council at the University of London, UK, USICA fellowship at the American Research and Studies Center, India, and the University Grants Commission Award in Bangladesh. He became the Dean of Arts and

Humanities at Jahangirnagar. In the 1990s and 2000s, he went abroad to teach at Michigan State University, USA as a Fulbright Scholar, then at King Saud University, KSA. After coming back to Bangladesh, he joined Eastern University, initially as the Dean of Arts and Law faculties, and later served as its Vice Chancellor. Before finally retiring in late 2016, he also taught at State University and Gono Bishwabidyalay.

He wrote multiple books, including an English textbook for classes 9-10, numerous research and non-academic articles on topics ranging from literature to travel. Over the course of his academic career spanning half a century, Dr Islam touched many lives through his inspirational teaching, exemplary gentleness and kindness. He was deeply loved and respected by his peers and students alike.

Other than enabling his students to grow, he also loved growing plants and trees. In his later years, despite a demanding work schedule in Dhaka city, he would spend every weekend at his country house a few miles away from the capital, which he had initially built for his autumn years, and had named "Retreat." There, he would be either working in the garden or engrossed in books. Although Retreat was his sanctuary, it was open to all his students, some of whom would sometimes come and enjoy the serene environment. His affinity for the natural translated into his fitness regime that he maintained up until a few months before his demise. Every day, he would perform meditation and yoga for an hour and brisk-walk around the tree-lined Dhanmondi Lake, again for an hour. As a result, he was in excellent health even at the start of 2017.

He passed away with his wife holding his hand and reciting verses of Rabinranath Tagore in his ear. He had once confided to her that he wanted to leave this world listening to the song "Jokhon porbe na mor payer chinho ei bate..." Another time, he said the only complaint he had against Tagore was that he was just too good!

Dr Nurul Islam died on November 22, 2017 due to multiple organ failure. He was 78. Prior to his passing, he had been suffering from Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, a type of cancer, which he fought bravely and resolutely till the very end.

Dr Nurul Islam's Namaj-e-Janaza was held at Jahangirnagar University and at his ancestral home in Waruk, where he was laid to rest in the family graveyard.

So, the little boy who used to run around at home and make his parents smile long ago, who then went on to build a scholar, humanist and a gentleman's life, having sailed the vast seas of learning, imparting parts of his being to thousands of his students and loved ones around the world, has now at the end of the day gone back home to slumber with his parents once more in the soil he so loved.

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