

# The whistle doesn't pull the train

## A tribute to an exceptional mentor

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

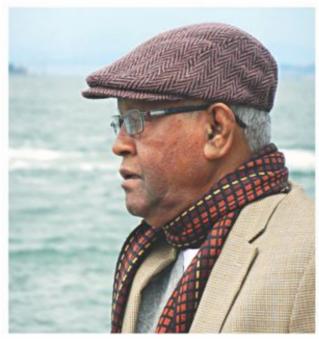
I was a junior lecturer when I had the privilege of working alongside Professor Nurul Islam, who was chairing the departmental admission test committee at Jahangirnagar University. As a student who had just entered the upper echelon of the academia, I became privy to the testing mechanism: setting up of question papers, typing them in manual typewriters, running them through the stencil machines, and stapling the pages together, counting them for individual packets, preparing them for exam halls—all done by the members of the admission committee.

We worked like a family in sync like a big engine with Prof Islam in the lead. I was intrigued by the essay topic that Prof Islam had set for the test: "Don't brag! The whistle does not drag the train." As I write this obituary for my mentor who passed away on November 22, for some strange reason that particular line from nearly 24 years ago pops up in my head as a statement that defines our professor. He has always been an extremely erudite person with remarkable humility. As the founding Chair of the Department of English,

Jahangirnagar University, he contributed immensely to its growth leading it from the front without making any show of it.

He was one of the few Bangladeshi teachers of his generation to get a PhD in English literature from the UK. Dr Islam attended the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, following his studies at the University of Dhaka and University of Leeds. His dissertation on *Graham Greene* was published as a monograph titled *Graham Greene, An Inverted Humanist*, and he even had the good fortune of meeting the author. We in turn had the good fortune of reading *The Quiet American* under him in our MA class, and was introduced to the complicity between America and Vietnam through an allegorised love relationship.

Dr Islam joined Jahangirnagar University in the early 70s and taught there until the mid-1990s. He started his career at Chittagong University before assuming the responsibility of a new department. Under his able leadership, with the proper guidance from the then VC Prof Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, the department recruited some renowned scholars such as Abu Rusud Matinuddin, ANM Bazlur



**Professor Dr Nurul Islam**  
(Sep 25, 1939 – Nov 22, 2017)  
PHOTO: COURTESY

Rashid, Azhar Hossain, Mohammas Rafiq, Shafi Ahmed, Shaheen Kabir, Afzal Hossain, Harunur Rashid, and Khaliqzaman Elias, among others, who gave the department both a solid footing and a different touch. The department invited Prof Amalendu Bose of Jadavpur University to draft its syllabi. Instead of traditional honours programme, JU English department introduced course system with Major and Minor in the late 70s. Prof Islam took a lien to teach at King Saud University, KSA,

and also at Michigan State University as a Fulbright Scholar. After his retirement from JU, a campus which he made his home, he joined Eastern University as its Vice Chancellor.

He used to tell us about his fanciful project of spending all his money that he earned while teaching in the Saudi Arabia in making a lavish house at Jahangirnagar Housing Society—Arunapalli. He named it "Retreat," and would spend most of his weekends there. "A newspaper and a steamy coffee in a sun basked wintry morning, what more do you want?"—he would tell his colleagues.

Prof Islam was a father figure for all of us. One of our classmates got into trouble once for a rash comment about JU male students. The opportunity-seekers took advantage and made her a persona non grata. As her classmates, we went to Prof Islam who was then the Dean of the Arts faculty. "Put yourself in her shoes..." one of us reasoned, and a senior professor reacted to the shoe reference without realising the cultural context. Prof Islam saved us from the wrath of the angry professor as well as from the students with hurt egos.

He was a politically conscientious faculty, but never allowed his

ideology interfere with his professional judgement. In a post-75 era, he was the founding president of the JU chapter of Bangabandhu Parishad. When I went to meet him after joining the department, he just told me: "Remember that you have earned a rare First Class, and nobody can take that away from you. You don't have to join any political party." My respect for Prof Islam increased manifold on that day.

Once a senior friend of mine was stopped from sitting for his exams as he did not have the required 75 percent class attendance. Prof Islam went to the Chair, and told him: "Are you punishing the boy or his family? Just think of the pain the family will have to endure if the graduation of this boy is deferred by a year." My senior brother got his clearance to attend his exams.

Prof Islam was extremely helpful. Whenever he would ask me to do something for Eastern University, such as giving a lecture or serving on the viva board, he would make it sound like I was doing him a favour. Such was his humility. He was a voracious reader. He was always seen reading something. So much so, I once saw one senior brother going to

the exam hall with a newspaper. People normally carry books or notes, but I was curious to see him carrying the newspaper. "Well, if I put it on the table, Islam sir is sure to pick it up and get engrossed in reading, which will allow us all to talk during exams." Indeed, he was a simple man who could be lost in his own world.

At the same time, he was a liberated soul. His daughter Nadiya Shabnam, one of the promising Bangladeshi writers in English, was telling me that Prof Islam bought her a copy of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* when she was only 14. Although a pious man, he would always hum Tagore's songs. According to his wife, Prof Sauda Akhter, who was there at the time of his death, he made his transition to the next world listening to Tagore's verse: *Mone re tai koho je/ bhalo mondo jahai ashuk, shotyore low shohoje* (Come what may, Tell your Mind, To accept truth in an easy way).

Dr Islam was laid to his final rest at his ancestral village in Chandpur.

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# Left, Right, Centre? Or does AAP defy simple definitions?



SAEED NAQVI

Probably move in the wrong circles, because nobody I know has a good word for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). You mention AAP and they begin to whine. This is not the response I get from neighbourhood drivers, other workers and their friends. There is a wide difference of opinion. Is there a clear class divide?

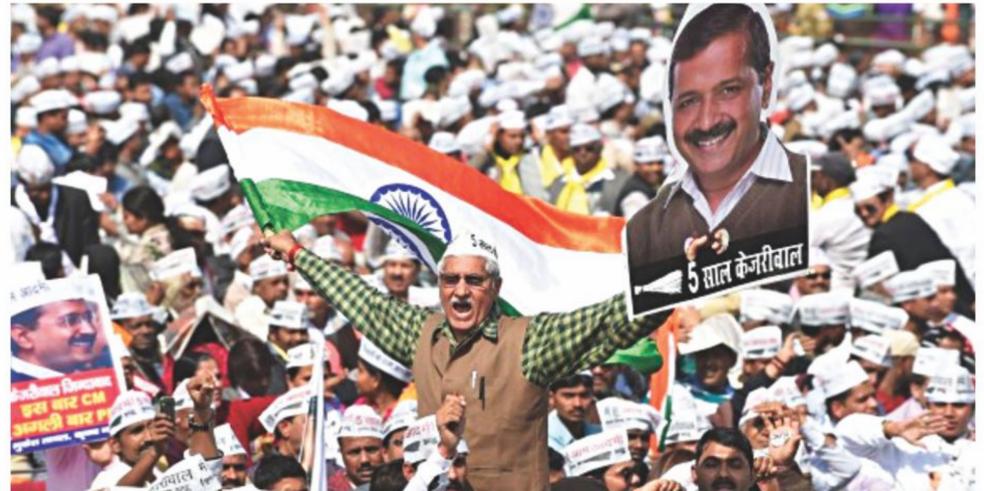
It was just as well that Algebra, the club which exposes the precocious to some intellectual titillation, screened *The Insignificant Man*, in which cinematic craft takes full advantage of reels upon reels of intimate footage of the AAP's first rise to power in December 2013.

All the images returned to my mind: AAP's shock debut in December 2013 and stunning consolidation in February 2015, winning 67 of the 70 seats in the State Assembly. I receive calls from friends in Mumbai: who should they contact in Delhi with sizeable donations? Wives of retired officials, copy editors are all volunteering to work for AAP. Doctors, nurses, technicians in Max hospital are wearing AAP badges—enthusiasm on an unimaginable scale. Just think of those heady days. AAP's meteoric rise and the new conventional wisdom have their reasons.

The way globalisation manifested itself in India may have boosted business but it stifled discourse. The four Cs, Cricket, Cinema, Crime and Communalism pushed out most serious debate from mainstream media. Murdochisation of the media was the order.

Pouring venom on AAP soon after its rise was only a shade less popular on the ratings chart than badgering Pakistan. AAP was neither Left nor Right. It was frontally against the establishment and the establishment was going to tattoo it with double fist punches.

Well informed, gregarious though



Supporters of the Aam Aadmi Party watch Arvind Kejriwal being sworn in as Delhi Chief Minister at Ramlila Grounds in New Delhi on February 14, 2015.

PHOTO: SAJJAD HUSSAIN/AFP

moderately paid journalists, were gradually replaced by star anchors with stellar salaries, mandated to ginger up content to support advertising, the vehicle for a burgeoning economy. Studios became arenas for cruel sport. But when the Lehman Brothers crashed in 2008, signalling capitalism's state of disrepair, the Indian economy too was checked in its tracks.

Crony capitalism tied to a system which had become increasingly unsure of itself, led to widespread suffocation across the globe. Voters began to dream dreams of breaking out of the strait jackets of the available political parties.

AAP was not the only eruption. There were many assaults on the establishment, from the Left as well as the Right, everywhere.

Systems churned, bringing out the establishment's willingness to make adjustments but only with the Right. The left was negotiated differently.

Take the 2016 US Presidential elections. The Republicans had settled for Jeb Bush in a tepid sort of a way but the Establishment's overwhelming consensus was for Hillary Clinton. That which made her

the Establishment's favourite was exactly the reason why she was unelectable: she was *THE* establishment, an entity utterly in bad odour with an exponentially increasing number.

Bernie Sanders a front runner by yards in the Democratic primaries and who, in retrospect would have won the election, was halted in his tracks. A gamble with Donald Trump as a possibility was considered preferable on both sides of the aisle to a "Caamunist" like Sanders. McCarthyism was alive.

Lets' consider an example elsewhere—Spain.

When Pablo Iglesias, leader of Podemos, a Communist formation, burst upon the political scene with substantial number of seats, The Establishment was rattled. Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy of the right-wing Peoples Party, primarily responsible for the unspeakable corruption which loomed heavy over the elections, had been reduced to a minority. He would have been defeated in the event of a vote in the House. But crafty systems managers kept a defeated prime minister in power until the next election in June 2016.

hurriedly promoted. It made noticeable gains. The Establishment had seen the writing on the wall. Manipulations could sustain the status quo but not beyond a point, given the growing resentment against establishments. In the meantime alternatives will have to be put in place—Ciudadanos, for instance—to protect Spain in the future from a Podemos like "disaster". It was the Ciudadanos model that Emanuel Macron followed in France: respond to a quest for apparent novelty and do the establishment's bidding.

A rash of Far Right, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic parties in Europe are causing anxieties to establishments. But imagine Communists like Pablo Iglesias in Spain or Jean-Luc Melenchon in France or even a mild Leftist like Sanders in the US: were these to be found anywhere in the vicinity of power and there would be upheaval on an epic scale. On the other hand, 31-year-old, Sebastian Kurz, far right, neo Nazi becomes Chancellor of Austria and murmurs, always faint,

are already inaudible. Keep the global background in mind but consider AAP in an Indian setting, because details are inevitably different from the West.

Remember how the Congress, BJP, Corporates, Media, Lt Governor, administration, police, enforcement agencies et al, pounced on AAP almost in concert? The young party was mauled, gored, not allowed to function. And soon, the media's high decibel 24/7 anti AAP chant did begin to affect the middle classes, the chatterati and the would-be AAP volunteers in 2014—they began to troop out. But Neighbourhood drivers and workers have not wavered, some of them are quite content with what AAP claims as its achievements—water, power, education, neighbourhood clinics.

"Any party even at municipal level, which has done as much—let it raise its hand." Says one of them. Well, well, I say, lets' wait till 2019.

Saeed Naqvi is a senior Indian journalist, television commentator and interviewer.

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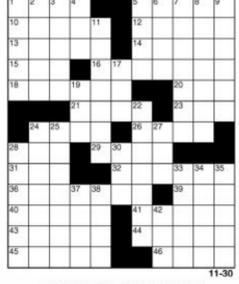
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### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

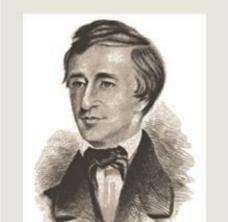
- ACROSS**
- 1 Pitt of "Troy"
  - 5 Birch's cousin
  - 10 Jar sticker
  - 12 Nary a soul
  - 13 Pueblo material
  - 14 Salad servers
  - 15 Polite address
  - 16 Easily broken
  - 18 Dot
  - 20 Back muscle
  - 21 Clumsy ones
  - 23 They hold power
  - 24 Promotable piece
  - 26 Blown away
  - 28 Zeus or Apollo
  - 29 Matador's need
  - 31 It's pressed for cash
  - 32 Petite
  - 36 Shape with a knife
  - 39 Spell
  - 40 Asian peninsula
  - 41 Artless
  - 43 African grazer
  - 44 Radio dial
  - 45 River part
  - 46 Hat material
  - 30 Maximum amount
  - 33 Owned by thee
  - 34 Flatten
  - 35 Bring to bear
  - 37 Circus setting
  - 38 Unveiling cry
  - 42 "-- Wiedersehen"
- DOWN**
- 1 Wild party
  - 2 Circle spokes
  - 3 Scrub, as a mission
  - 4 Coming-out girl
  - 5 Opposed
  - 6 Pirate's take
  - 7 "Give it to me
  - 8 Dover setting
  - 9 Fixes, as a clock
  - 11 Matt of "Man With a Plan"
  - 17 Game caller
  - 19 Highway rescue
  - 22 Wise
  - 24 Driving hazard
  - 25 Navy bigwig
  - 27 Soaked
  - 28 Stared stupidly



#### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

D I S A R M    A S K S  
A C A D I A    S L I P  
N E W E L L    C O D A  
P E L L E T  
P O S T    I N B E D  
A M P    W H A T A M I  
C A L    A I R    C A T  
T H I R S T S    K I T  
S A T U P    O S L O  
E N S I G N  
N O N O    C O S M O S  
U R D U    O N E I D A  
T E S T    N E T T E D

### QUOTABLE Quote



**HENRY DAVID THOREAU**  
AMERICAN ESSAYIST, POET, PHILOSOPHER AND HISTORIAN

*Nature is full of genius, full of the divinity; so that not a snowflake escapes its fashioning hand.*