

Kashinath Roy: A teacher, poet and mentor of extraordinary stature

AZFAZ HUSSAIN

My teacher Professor Kashinath Roy (1947–2021)—poet, short story writer, essayist—died on January 17, at 74. Or did he die?

Professor Roy was my direct teacher in the Department of English, Dhaka University (DU), where I studied as an undergraduate. I recall the moment when I first saw him: he immediately stood out from the crowd because of his attire and appearance. Indeed, his immaculate white *pyjama* and *panjabi* remained constant in his life—attire that also seemed organic to his body and his being—making the point that style itself is political.

Professor Roy taught us the English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy. He had a style of language and a cadence of his own, which stole into the heart with strange and remarkable power. He used to pace back and forth in our classroom, generating a spatial rhythm that we thought harmonised with the temporal movements of his beautifully textured sentences that also exemplified verbal economy. For him teaching was a work of art.

Kashinath Roy's lectures on Hardy's *Egdon Heath* and novelistic architectonics, on Greek and Shakespearean tragedies, and on Jane Austen's persistent preoccupations with money and manners and morals and marriage in her work have still remained with me. I am inclined to characterise his pedagogy as poetic and performative—a pedagogy that shows how teaching itself is love made visible.

We—his students—continued to marvel at the depth and range of his knowledge. He taught us the poetics and politics and philosophy of the novel, while also demonstrating that the novel is a world unto itself and yet imbricated in the world outside it. He was characteristically and critically

attentive to that very dialectic of the word and the world. While he passionately valorised the aesthetic dimensions of literary works, he never sealed them off from the historical, the social, and the political as such. For him "close readings" were never closed readings.

In short, Professor Roy was a committed, brilliant, articulate, engaged, and even a very popular teacher—one whose life seemed to depend on teaching. I was exceedingly fortunate that I quickly became close to Professor Roy. I even frequented his residence at one point. Thus, we had numerous informal conversations that ranged within a broad zodiac of our concerns while involving and intensifying my three abiding passions in life—poetry, politics, and philosophy.

Indeed, it was Professor Roy who got me interested in the great French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé and the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, while he did much to deepen my interest in Shakespeare. I was then bedazzled by his knowledge of Shakespeare. As the story has it, before he came to study English at DU, he had memorised Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in its entirety. I myself repeatedly saw how my teacher could quote Shakespeare at the drop of a hat while offering lucid interpretations of his plays and relating them to the dull prose of our daily living, thereby making Shakespeare come alive.

Our conversations also surrounded Marxian political economy at one point. I found Professor Roy decisively anti-capitalist and anti-colonial in his orientation and sensibility while I clearly sensed his strong predilection for socialism in the face of monstrous anti-socialist aestheticism, aggressively prevalent as it was in his milieu. It is not for nothing that he held his teacher (and my teacher) Serajul Islam Choudhury—the country's leading socialist intellectual—in



Professor Kashinath Roy (1947–2021).

PHOTO: FACEBOOK

high esteem.

To many of us, indeed, Professor Roy was one of the best teachers of Bengali literature as well, and one of the best contemporary Bengali poets, one whose beautiful and powerful lines I tirelessly exchanged and discussed with my great peer and senior poet-friend Golam Faruque Khan. Although this is not the place to evaluate Kashinath Roy's prose and poetry—I've plans to do so in the future of course—I still intend to touch quickly on what he himself called his "transactions with words."

In 2009 Kaiser Haq—Kashinath Roy's longtime close friend and my teacher—provided a brief but useful note on his work: "Kashinath Roy began writing in his teens, and in the sixties published regularly in periodicals like *Kanhuaswar* [...] After

that he published little, though he kept on writing—poems, short stories, at least one novella. [...] He was 60 when he published his first book, a verse play [called *Divine Comedy*] he had written in his teens. And, at 61, he published a substantial collection of [...] poems, *Jibanananda Dekhun* ("Take a Look, Jibanananda")." Haq added: "These poems are forthright, often bitterly satirical, eminently readable, and a most pertinent commentary on the state of our nation." Then, in 2012, his third and last book—again a collection of poems—called *Ami Jaha Dite Pari* came out. In other words, Kashinath Roy published a total of three books during his lifetime.

Kashinath Roy also wrote several short stories. His "Rupantar" (1964) and his "Memsahber Paa" (1977) in particular are both disruptive and innovative works that at once attest to his distinctive fictional imagination and matchless prose, although those works have not received critical attention at all. Further, he wrote a number of essays and articles in both English and Bengali. Owing to space-constraints, I will mention only two—his long epistolary piece written in English under the *nom de plume* of Irfan Pramanik for the first-rate magazine of the arts called *Form* (edited by my teacher Professor Shawkat Hussain) and his late autobiographical meditation in Bengali called "Nihritro Shikkhokher Sandhane" that appeared in the journal *Natum Diganta* (edited by Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury). His autobiographical piece also fiercely mobilises a devastating critique of our market-driven academic culture, our colonial mindset, and our middle-class hypocrisies, among other things. But Kashinath Roy is a poet in the first place—a powerful and distinctive one at that (to say the least)—one who has hitherto been seriously neglected in Bangladesh.

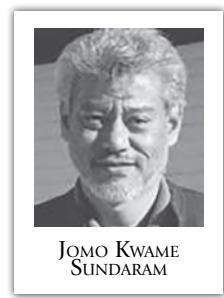
On more personal registers: When I was 19 and in my second year in the English department, out of my profound admiration for my teacher's work, I ended up translating one of his representative poems into English. And my teacher Professor Shawkat Hussain generously published it in his magazine *Form*. But when I saw my translation in print, it suddenly occurred to me that I could not do justice to Kashinath Roy's original poem. I made it a point not to face my teacher immediately. Yet I bumped into him while he immediately but ardently thanked me for that translation. Such was his magnanimity!

Indeed, what kind of a person was my teacher Kashinath Roy? In his autobiographical meditation, he declares: "There is no doubt that I'm an oddball in this society." Yes, my teacher was exemplarily "weird," remarkably "strange," exceptional. Never did he care about worldly success, nor did he "network" in an environment where networking is deemed both practical and profitable, nor did he ever seek any form of what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls "cultural capital" or "symbolic capital." No prominent critic ever cared to write in a sustained manner about whatever "little" my teacher had produced. But his life itself—lived as it was—embodied "rage against the machine" on the one hand and radical quietude on the other.

Is my teacher Kashinath Roy dead? My answer is "no." He remains—and will continue to remain—alive in our stories and our memories, in his invaluable contributions to his students' lives, and in his own works and words.

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Nothing to learn from East Asia?



JOMO KWAME SUNDARAM

COVID-19 infection and death rates in the Western world and many developing countries in Asia and Latin America have long overtaken East Asia since the second quarter of 2020. Perhaps unsurprisingly,

considering prevailing western accounts of the Asian financial crises, there have been no serious efforts to draw policy lessons from East Asian contagion containment.

Lockdowns necessary?

Although most East Asian economies have successfully contained the pandemic without nationwide "stay in shelter lockdowns", many governments have seen such measures as necessary. But lockdowns are blunt measures, with inevitable adverse consequences, especially for businesses and employment.

Many countries have thus imposed lockdowns, citing China's response in Wuhan. But as the first WHO fact-finding mission to China noted, "The majority of the response in China, in 30 provinces, was about case finding, contact tracing, and suspension of public gatherings—all common measures used anywhere in the world to manage [infectious] diseases.

Lockdowns were limited to a few cities where contagion went "out of control in the beginning". The key lesson from China was "all about...speed. The faster you can find the cases, isolate the cases, and track their close contacts, the more successful you're going to be."

To be sure, lockdowns "flatten the curve" by temporarily preventing further contagion. But unless accompanied by appropriate complementary measures, undetected infectious individuals may cause silent community transmission that becomes evident only too late. Instead of lockdowns, it is far more prudent to find and isolate cases before numbers become unmanageable.

South Korean lessons

The Republic of Korea was the first country to dramatically reduce the number of Covid-19

cases and related deaths without nationwide movement restrictions. It checked the spread of Covid-19 infections without imposing lockdowns, even in Daegu its most infected city.

Mass testing has been key to its response, doing the most by mid-March. By late March, Korea's newly confirmed cases had fallen from second to eighth place in the world. Meanwhile, Korean authorities urged physical distancing, personal hygiene and remote

work while discouraging mass gatherings.

Lessons from Vietnam

Three months ago, a Vietnamese official described how "Vietnam is fighting Covid without pitting economic growth against public health". Besides testing and contact-tracing, "the government has depoliticised the pandemic, treating it purely as a health crisis, allowing for effective governance".

Hence, there is "no political motive for



Worshippers wearing face masks attend a prayer ceremony entitled 'overcoming and healing the Covid-19 coronavirus', while marking Buddha's birthday at the Jogye Buddhist Temple in Seoul.

PHOTO: AFP

work while discouraging mass gatherings. The government also had legal authority to collect phone, credit card and other data to expedite contact tracing, and initially only restricted incoming travellers from Hubei province, where Wuhan is, for precautionary reasons, and from Japan in political retaliation.

Just as China had rapidly identified pathogen characteristics using artificial intelligence and big data access, Korea innovatively deployed new technologies to

government officials to hide information, as they don't face being reprimanded if there are positive cases in their authority area that are not due to their mistakes".

He noted that, "With the head of the Hanoi centre for disease control being arrested for suspected corruption in relation to the purchase of testing kits, and small traders getting fines for price-gouging face-masks, the government has also been clear that public health cannot be entangled with commercial interests".

After China announced its first infections and deaths in January 2020, "Vietnam tightened its border and airport control of Chinese visitors. This wasn't an easy decision, given that cross-border trade with China accounts for a significant part of the Vietnamese economy".

Vietnam also "took precautionary measures above and beyond World Health Organization recommendations". Preparations started "a week before the outbreak was officially declared a public health emergency of international concern, and more than a month before WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic".

The communist-led government also ensured "freedom of information on Covid-related matters". "Lockdown and isolation are more selective" from the outset, without resorting to nationwide lockdowns, as has happened elsewhere without much benefit.

Vietnam is one of the few countries with "positive GDP growth" in 2020; "the supposed trade-off between the economy and public health... looks to be something of a false choice".

In their war, Vietnam is believed to have lost over three million people compared to 58,209 US lives. In fighting the virus, Vietnam, with 97 million people, has lost 35 lives so far, while the US, with a 332 million population, has lost almost four hundred thousand.

Mass testing crucial

After a year of living with Covid-19, all governments can learn a great deal from critical evaluation of their own country experiences, other experiences as well as accumulated, especially new knowledge relevant to feasible policy options.

Thus far, appropriate East Asian policy measures for rapid early detection, isolation and contact tracing, while protecting the most vulnerable and treating the infected, have succeeded in flattening the curve.

More reliable, cheaper methods (e.g., "lateral-flow" antigen tests) allow more frequent mass testing. As undetected cases are more likely to spread infection, such tests enable more frequent, faster and easier testing and quicker results, and facilitate faster, more efficacious actions.

This can help check contagion by identifying more of those infected earlier,

thus reducing transmission. Even though less accurate than supposed "gold standards", lower costs allow more widespread and frequent testing to identify many more of those infected.

Easier to administer and delivering results more rapidly, such cheaper, simpler and quicker tests more speedily detect the infected, especially among the asymptomatic, in time for appropriate and timely action.

As SARS-CoV-2 transmission peaks several days after infection, together with the viral load, more frequent testing is necessary to check contagion. More frequent mass testing is probably going to detect many more of those infected much earlier, while they are still infectious.

Look East

In the early 20th century, a young Cambridge-trained doctor, Wu Lien Teh returned to practice in the British colony of Penang where he mobilised thousands against the opium trade. The authorities arrested him, forcing him to seek employment outside the British empire.

He eventually found work with China's Ching emperor in Manchuria where a plague was raging, eventually claiming 60,000 lives. Recognising it as pneumonic, Wu recommended use of multi-layered masks he designed to protect users against airborne infection, now recognised as forerunner of the N95 mask.

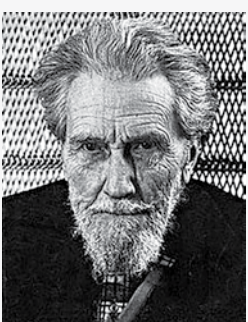
His later analysis of the socio-behavioural determinants of zoonotic transmission of the epidemic was also pioneering. Sadly, a famous French doctor Gerald Mesny, who rejected Wu's mask advice as diagnostically wrong, died of the plague soon after arrival.

Over a century later, and over two decades after the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis exposed the systemic financial fragility creating conditions for the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, the reluctance to learn from the East continues, ignoring Prophet Muhammad's advice to "seek knowledge, even unto China".

Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, was United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, and received the Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought in 2007.

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QUOTE



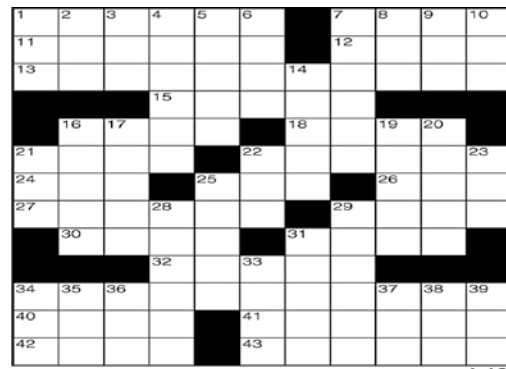
EZRA POUND (1885-1972)

American poet and critic.

A slave is one who waits for someone to come and free him.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| ACROSS | 32 English country | 14 Wanderer |
| 1 Least common | 34 Company that's failing | 16 Carved gem |
| 7 Listending abbr. | 40 Buffalo's lake | 17 Korean or Thai |
| 11 Magic potion | 41 Catch sight of | 19 Until now |
| 12 Fancy party | 42 Cried | 20 Handyman's collection |
| 13 Chest bone | 43 Flower part | 21 Touch lightly |
| 15 Cleaner scent | | 22 Pet perch |
| 16 "Memory" musical | | 23 Pay stub line |
| 18 Largest amount | DOWN | 25 Fish dish |
| 21 Go by | 1 Game official | 28 Colonial gun |
| 22 Shallow inlet | 2 Completely | 29 Midday break |
| 24 French friend | 3 Carnival spot | 31 Secret lingo |
| 25 Despondent | 4 Glorifies | 33 Taverns |
| 26 Opponent | 5 Places | 34 Attach a patch |
| 27 Join forces | 6 Quick cut | 35 Hot blood |
| 29 Shaker fill | 7 Yuletide drink | 36 Tiny taste |
| 30 Burden | 8 Road goo | 37 That fellow |
| 31 Melodies | 9 Boxing great | 38 Water cooler |
| | 10 Chemist's place | 39 Stock holder |



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S P O C K O P I N E
I O W A N M A N I A
S E E M E I R O N S
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BETLE BAILEY



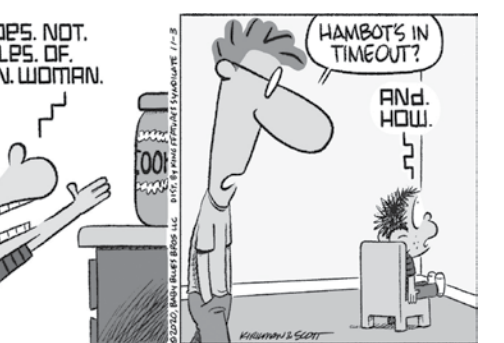
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BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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