

## He Went Gentle into That Good Night

Md Rezaul Haque<sup>1</sup>  
St. John's University, New York

A robust optimism was his hallmark. In the midst of “things fall[ing] apart,” he stood tall, unshaken, boldly resisting the temptation to yield to despair. I don't remember I ever saw him without that winsome smile on his sharp face—a smile that allowed his interlocutors have a glimpse of the inner glow that animated his entire personality as well as whatever he did, most notably the way he taught.

How did he teach? Mesmerisingly! Under the spell of his hypnotic eloquence, one lost one's sense of time, and one never knew when they had set out with him on a voyage of discovery to Lilliput, Xanadu, or Dublin. When one landed and the spell broke, the thrill lingered on. Hence the inevitable: By the end of the very first voyage of discovery, one was pleasantly surprised to realise they had fallen in love with literature. And in most cases, the love affair survived the test of time.

But he was not just a classroom teacher, superbly unpacking the intricacies of literature or authoritatively expounding on WB Yeats. To see him teach in a classroom setting is to form a partial picture of his teaching excellence. He was a teacher every waking moment of his life. One learnt from him as long as one was in his company. In fact, one learnt a lot more in *addas* (informal chat sessions) with him. The ambience of an *adda* was in perfect alignment with his amiable temperament, and it never failed to induce him to open up. And once he got started, he would hold forth on a wide spectrum of subjects, ranging from the art of pottery to postmodernist architecture. Every time I had an opportunity to hear him talk in an *adda*, I don't know why I couldn't help feeling like the anonymous narrator in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, listening to his uncle-mentor Tridib, awestricken.

Classroom and *adda* are, however, not the only spaces where one learnt from him. His graceful presence in public discursive domains such as newspapers and talk shows was no less impressive and instructive. In these domains,

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<sup>1</sup> **Md Rezaul Haque**, PhD, teaches at St. John's University, New York. He co-edited *The Shadow of the Precursor* (2012) and guest edited along with Gillian Dooley a special issue of *Gitanjali & Beyond* on Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (2020). He has published internationally on Indian English fiction and writers from the South Asian diaspora. He is also a poet and Translations Editor for *Transnational Literature* (Australia-UK). Haque has published three books of Bangla poetry to date. Email: haquem@stjohns.edu

especially on talk shows, he consistently practiced civic virtues without which a society cannot call itself cultured or civilised. Whatever be the topic of discussion, he would always speak in his usual soft and sparkling manner and in a language astonishingly free from jargon and clichés. Even when his opponents talked nonsense, lost temper, and started making a lot of noise, he would calmly hold his ground, patiently wait for his turn to arrive, and thus uphold his conviction that noise doesn't make an irrational argument rational. Just as in his personal life, moderation played a key role in his public life too. He knew what to say but, much more importantly, how much to say.

Another notable aspect of his public persona is his whole-hearted commitment to the ideals of democracy and tolerance. He knew if his way of looking at things was dear to him, that of his adversaries was no less so to them. That's why I never saw him interrupting or getting cross with someone simply because they held a different perspective or contradicted his position. He was willing to listen to all points of view with due respect, as he never entertained the least doubt that democracy thrives only where debate and dialogue are given full rein. The freer the socio-political space for debate and dialogue, he persistently believed, the healthier a nation.

I began this memorial tribute foregrounding his optimistic attitude to life. Despite so much bitterness, cruelty, and cynicism all around, he tended to see things from a positive angle. The source of his optimism was his unflinching confidence in the transformative power of the younger generations who he thought better qualified to lead the nation than most political leaders of an earlier generation. Yet he often found himself at odds with certain proclivities of people around him. He couldn't make sense of the indifference with which people treated nature and the very environment in which they lived. The ease with which violence was done to nature and non-human forms of life pained him. A tireless champion of excellence and professionalism, he had no truck with mediocrity and was ever so vigilant to keep his distance from the charlatans. He felt terribly upset with people who failed to keep commitments, whether it entailed showing up on time to keep an appointment or honouring a submission deadline. But what distressed him most is the ever-increasing greed, selfishness, and intolerance of people he daily interacted with. On more than one occasion I heard him quip: We don't have any bourgeoisie, not even a petty one. All we have is a *fatty* bourgeoisie!

I first came to know about his critical health condition via a Facebook post on October 3, 2025. The next couple of days, I couldn't pull up the courage to check my Facebook account. It's only when I learnt from Professor Fakrul Alam that he was "improving slowly" that I could return to Facebook. The news

that he was getting better, though slowly, so emboldened me that I couldn't resist posting Dylan Thomas' immortal poem "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" on my Facebook wall. It was as if the menace of death could now be taken with a pinch of salt!

October 3, 2025 was a Friday. Exactly a week later. Another Friday. Another Facebook post. On a bright sunny morning, I woke up (in New York) to learn Professor Emeritus Syed Manzoorul Islam (1951–2025), our dear SMI, had gone "gentle into that good night." What else he could have done, I wonder, given the kind of perfect gentleman he has been all his life!