

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Today we are observing the birth anniversaries of two most popular and most well respected towering Bengali poets and they are Poet Rabindronath Tagore and Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. Tagore was the first Nobel Laureate in literature and perhaps the only litterateur who penned anthems of two countries in the world; Bangladesh and India while Nazrul is known as a rebel Poet, the national poet of Bangladesh.

Nazrul was born in West Bengal of India but laid at rest in Bangladesh. Tagore who managed his landed estates in East Bengal laid in rest in India. Tagore being the youngest of 13 children of an aristocracy enrolled to be a prospective barrister-at-law in London at age 17 but left it to explore Shakespeare and more. In contrast, Nazrul, the second of 4 surviving children could not attend school owing to financial constraints and he left it at age 11 to earn a living. Both did not have formal education but both of them reshaped and enriched the Bengali language, literature, poems, music, drama, education, philosophy and more importantly, no comparison yet been born in their field in Bangla language.

Interestingly, both were born in the month of May and both died in the month of August--- Nazrul was born on May 26th 1899 and died on August 29, 1976 while Tagore was born on May 7th 1861 and died on August 7, 1941. Both were politically conscious, both opposed the atrocities of the British Raj. Tagore gave up his Knighthood in protest of the [Jallianwala Bagh Massacre](#), Nazrul was imprisoned on treason charges repeatedly for his revolutionary writings against the British Raj such as "Bidrohi" (The Rebel), "Bhangar Gaan" (The Song of Destruction), as well as his publication of "Dhumketu" (The Comet).

Tagore was soothing, milder, idealistic and compassionate with his philosophical appeal of love and inner self while Nazrul was revolutionary, violent, spirited, inspiring, ready to embrace love, ready to destroy and root out the social evils, bigotry, and the like. Despite differences, Tagore welcomed Nazrul to fill the vacuum, while Nazrul looked toward Tagore as his mentor. Both maintained close association.

Tagore and Nazrul were the most widely read popular poets, novelists, musicians, and playwrights of Bengal and they reshaped [Bengali literature and music](#). Tagore's profoundly sensitive, fresh, beautiful, simple, and soothing verses that express deep philosophical and spiritual inner self are still vibrant and alive. His prophetic words, I quote, "Azi Hothe Shotho Borsho Pore Ke Thumi Porecho Boshi Amar Kobitha Khani kuwtuhal Borey" --- who are you reading my poem even after 100 years.

No wonder, Tagore was perhaps the most important literary figure of Bangla literature. He was a mesmerizing representative of the Indian culture whose influence and popularity internationally perhaps could only be compared to that of [Gandhi](#), whom Tagore named '[Mahatma](#)' out of his deep admiration for him.

Tagore started writing his poems at age 8 and drama at age 16. Nazrul started playing in theatrical group known as *leto* at around age 8 and published his first novel "Bandhan Hara" (Freedom from Bondage) at age 21. His advent is like a comet or a thunder and soon he captivated the whole Bengali community by publishing his poem "Bidrohi" at age 22, which remains his most famous work, winning admiration of India's literary classes by his description of the rebel whose impact is fierce and ruthless even as its spirit is deep and wild. Nazrul's literary lifespan was nearly 1/4th of that of Tagore's but he captivated the whole nation with spirit and inspiration.

Tagore modernized Bengali art by spurning rigid classical forms. His stories, songs, dance-dramas, essays and novels were acclaimed for their lyricism, colloquialism, naturalism, and contemplation. His poems and music are like prayers for one's self enrichment and salvation. For example,

“Onthoro Momo Bikoshitho Koro Onthoro Thoro Hey.
Jukthokoro Hey Shaber Sange Muktho Korohey Bandho.
Uzzalo koro, Nonditho koro, Sundhoro Korohey” ---

[Make my inner self exposed in the best possible way. Join me with others and liberate myself from bondage. Enlighten me; make me great and beautiful in the truest sense of the term].

Tagore composed nearly 2,230 songs known as *Rabindra Sangeet* besides poems, paintings, short stories, drama, etc. Nazrul composed nearly 4,000 songs plus Ghazals known as *Nazrul geeti and Ghazals*. Both Nazrul geeti , ghazals and Rabindra Sangeet are still very popular.

In 1912, Tagore took a sheaf of his translated works to England, where they impressed missionary and Gandhi protégé [Charles F. Andrews](#), Anglo-Irish poet [William Butler Yeats](#), [Ezra Pound](#), [Robert Bridges](#), [Ernest Rhys](#), [Thomas Sturge Moore](#), and others. Indeed, Yeats wrote the preface to the English translation of *Gitanjali* that won Nobel Prize. Tagore's travels abroad nearly 30 countries allowed him to interact with many notable contemporaries, including [Henri Bergson](#), [Albert Einstein](#), [Robert Frost](#), [Thomas Mann](#), [George Bernard Shaw](#), [H.G. Wells](#) and Nobel Laureate [Romain Rolland](#).

Tagore is a mystic poet but Nazrul is a rebel poet. Nazrul revolted against not only the British Raj but also against social evils, injustice, unfairness, bigotry, intolerance and discrimination. His writings were revolutionary, forceful and full of spirit. His poetry is a sharp departure from that of Tagore's in tone, in expression and in language. He was a down-to-earth vibrant [poet](#), a [musician](#) and a [revolutionary](#) who pioneered poetic works espousing intense spiritual rebellion against [fascism](#) and oppression. His poetry and nationalist activism earned him the popular title of *Bidrohi Kobi* or Rebel Poet.

Nazrul's "Bidrohi" as I said in is not only fierce and ruthless but his genius of application of languages together---words from Bangla, Arabic, Sanskrit, Persian, English and mythological depth of them is unique and non-comparable. In his Bidrohi, he writes;

I am the unutterable grief,
I am the trembling first touch of the virgin,
I am the throbbing tenderness of her first stolen kiss.
I am the fleeting glance of the veiled beloved,
I am her constant surreptitious gaze...

I am the burning volcano in the bosom of the earth,
I am the wild fire of the woods,
I am Hell's mad terrific sea of wrath!
I ride on the wings of lightning with joy and profundity,
I scatter misery and fear all around,
I bring earth-quakes on this world!
I am the rebel eternal,
I raise my head beyond this world,
High, ever erect and alone! “ (English translation by Kabir Choudhary)

Nazrul is a great humanist. He writes;

মরুপলাশ গ্রুপ অব পাবলিকেশন্স রিয়াদ, সউদীআরব কর্তৃক প্রকাশিত।। পৃষ্ঠা # ২/৬

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Gahi Sammer Gaan
Manusher Cheye Boro kichu nai, nohe kichu mohiyon
Nai Desh Kal Pather Ved, Aved Dhormo Jathi
Jekane Mishechey Hindu-Bhudda-Muslim-Kristan
Gahi Sammer Gaan”

(I sing for human unity, no one is bigger to human beings, no reason to discriminate owing to place, time, or religion)

Recently at the UN, we had our Conference on Status of Women plus Beijing 15+ event. Thousands of delegates deliberated and discussed the issue of women. Interestingly, it was poet Nazrul who acknowledged women for their contribution to humankind decades ago. He professed faith in the equality of women.

“Bishe Jaha Mohan Sristi Chiro Kollayan Kor
Ordek Thar Daniayche Nari, Ordek Thar nor”

[..whatever great or benevolent achievements, that are in this world, half of that was by woman, the other half by man]

He stunned the society with his poem "Barangana" (Prostitute), in which he addresses a prostitute as "mother". Nazrul accepts the prostitute as a human being, reasoning that this person was breast-fed by a noble woman and belonging to the race of "mothers and sisters"; he assails society's negative notions of prostitutes. He writes;

Who calls you a prostitute, mother?
Who spits at you?
Perhaps you were suckled by someone
as chaste as [Seeta](#). [translation by Sajed Kamal]

O-shothi Narir Putro Jodi Jarog Putro Hoy
O-shoth Pithar Putro Thobey Jarog Shu-Nischoy
(..if the son of an unchaste mother is illegitimate, so is the son of an unchaste father)

To Nazrul, woman was a complete human being and he dreamt of a new era where women would be treated as equal. He writes;

Shey Jug Hoyeche Bashi
Je Juge Purosh Das Chilo Nako
Narira Chilo Dashi
Sother Jug Manusher Jug Azi
Kaho Rohi-bena Bondi Khaharoo
Utichey Donka Baji”

(..the days of subjugation of man over woman are over. No one will be subjugated to another)

Some consider Nazrul as a Rebel poet, some as Romantic poet, some as a Poet of Humanism, some as Muslim Renaissance poet, and many as a reformer. In fact, underlying all his contributions, a philosophy of life is enumerated in his writings--a philosophy that humanity is superior to all and he is none but a messenger.

He himself stated it when he had to testify in the British Court and said, “I am a poet. I have been sent by God to express the unexpressed, to portray the un-portrayed. ... My voice is but a medium for Truth, the message of God... I am the instrument of that eternal self-evident truth, an instrument that voices forth the message of the ever-lasting truth. I am an instrument of God and this instrument is unbreakable”. Or,

“ Oki Chondal? Chomkow Ken? Nohye Ay Grinno Jib
Oi hote pare Horish Chandra Oi Sho-shaner Shiv
Az Chondal Kal Hote Pare Moha Kabi Samrat
Tarai Anilo Omar Bani, Jha Ache Robe Chirokal
Thumi Thare Ogro Danibe, Koribe Nandi Paat
Jotho Nabi Chilo Meshher Rakal
Thara Dorilo Pal”

[..a poor person could be a great person, a priest, a hero, a king or a great poet. All the prophets were sheppard and they guided the nations]

Bidrohi Kabi Nazrul was an excellent composer, lyricist, singer, musician and a revolutionary and his teachings will remain fresh forever as long as there will remain social discrimination and injustice. I am pleased that Bangladesh government has set up a Nazrul University in Trishal, Mymensingh where he attended school and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recently declared of setting up of a Rabindronath University in Sagordari, Khustia where he spent his time in Bangladesh in line with that of the Bisho-Varothi University that Tagore established himself. Few universities of USA have Tagore institutes or chairs but there was none for Nazrul.

Only recently at the initiative of a few members of the Bangladesh Diasporas in USA, Nazrul Chairs are being set up in two universities, one in Connecticut and another in California. This is a good beginning but not enough. It is time for others to come forward to set up Nazrul Institutes to promote the ideals and ideas that Nazrul so eloquently tried to portray in his writings, poems, songs, music and ghazals.

Thank you all.

[Speech delivered by Dr. AK Abdul Momen, Bangladesh Ambassador & Permanent Representative to the UN at the Rabindro-Narzul Anniversary at the Bangladesh Mission on May 22, 2010, New York]

Reverend Monks, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentleman

Vesak Day commemorates the birth, enlightenment and *nirvana* of Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni Buddha. This Day falls on the Full Moon of the fourth lunar month. The earliest Vesak Festival is reportedly started being observed nearly 2,554 years ago. However, in recent recorded documents, Singapore started observing it first in 1925 and since 1956 they observed it each year on May 24th. The UN started observing it since last few years. In my own country Bangladesh, the Vesak Day, known as *Buddha Purnima* or *Baishakhi Purnima*, is also celebrated every year with solemnity and dignity. The date, however, depends on the sighting of the moon.

Buddhists believe that performing good deeds on Vesak Day would multiply merit many times over. General rites and rituals practiced on Vesak Day include chanting of mantras, releasing caged birds and animals, having vegetarian meals, and of course, bathing of Buddha statue. Buddhists youth also organize mass blood donations at hospitals. Most statues of Lord Buddha are illuminated on Vesak Day. The celebration concludes with a candlelight procession.

Lord Buddha was a human being. He was born as a human being, lived as a human being and passed away as a human being. Born as the son of a king in 624 B. C. in present Nepal Siddhartha sacrificed his pleasures, family, wealth and power to achieve enlightenment and he did. He meditated with deep concentration under the *Budi Brikko* for years and was able to chart out a path for the mankind in their quest for peace, happiness, and tranquility.

The heart of the Teachings of the Buddha is contained in the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, namely,

The Noble Truth of *Dukkho* or suffering
The Origin or Cause of suffering
Nirodha or the End or Cessation of suffering
The Path which leads to the cessation of all sufferings

Therefore, the purpose of life, as per Buddha, is to put an end to sufferings. Question is; how to be successful over sufferings. Buddha showed his Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold path avoids the extremes of self-indulgence on one hand and self-torture on the other. It consists of Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

Buddha believed that latent and creative power of human being is enough to get rid of sufferings and sorrow. In the process, he recognized the dignity and potentiality of human mind. He called for equality, fraternity, meditation, moderation, compassion and understanding--- exhorting its followers to avoid evil, to do good and to purify their minds. In today's world, to have peace and happiness, there is room for inculcating Buddha's teachings, there is scope for building 'purified' minds. For us who work at the UN to establish peace, security and development this Day, therefore, is of special significance.

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I am thankful to the Permanent Mission of the Philippines especially Ambassador H. E. Libran Cabactulan for inviting our Mission to participate and present our programs. I also thank the Permanent Missions especially the Ambassadors of Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Japan, Korea, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam for putting up such a wonderful program for the Vesak Day.

I thank you all.

[Speech by Bangladesh Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN Dr. AK Abdul Momen at the Vesak Day observation at the UN, New York, May 21, 2010].