

**150th anniversary of birth of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore  
- Inaugural Ceremony**

Speech by  
Sheikh Hasina  
**Prime Minister**

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh  
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Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

The Chair,  
Honorable vice president of India Mr. Hamid Ansari,  
Dear Colleagues,  
Dear Guests.  
Ladies and gentlemen:

**Assalamu Alaikum.**

It's indeed a great pleasure for me to be present at this august inaugural ceremony of the programmes of the 150th anniversary of birth of great poet Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

I welcome you all to this event organized to honor the great poet of the Bengali language. I myself and on behalf of the countrymen pay deep homage to the great poet.

In his "1400 Bangla Shaal", Tagore wrote:

A hundred years from today  
who are you, sitting, reading a poem of mine,  
under curiosity's sway -  
a hundred years from today?

In his response to this poem, a yet another shining beacon for our national struggle, rebel Poet Nazrul Islam, wrote a poem under the same title, in which he reflected:

A hundred years from today  
Who is the poet that remembered us  
In his full passion's sway -  
A hundred years from today?

On the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of birth of Rabindranath Tagore, on behalf of the people of Bangladesh, I would like to fondly reflect on Tagore and extend my deepest respect for the poet-sage.

Tagore is not only a poet or a writer but also the lighthouse that guides both the individual and social consciousness of Bengali people. His presence remains with us at the time of love or pain, peace or struggle.

I remember the magnificent way my father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the greatest Bengali of all time, used to give voice to lines such as: "Even if nobody follows you. Walk alone. Even if nobody listens to you..." or "Whose message we hear from the path of sunrise, don't be afraid, have no fear, who sacrifices his life thoroughly, he never ends, he lives ever".

On the 150th birth anniversary of Tagore, I recall my father who used to recite his favorite lines:

The oldest truth prevails  
Overshadowing the plateau of heaven and hell  
And gives voice to the deepest travail: "Oh, I won't let you go", Yet,  
Everyone must go, and goes too.

While we plan to cling onto our nearest and dearest ones, they leave us leaving only their memory and deeds behind.

My first brush with Rabindranath was through my father. Later on, while studying Bangla literature at a postgraduate level, I came to know of his work in an extensive manner.

In his struggle for the freedom of Bengali people, my father spent almost 19 years in prison. As an inmate, one of the things that accompanied his lonely cells was the collected work of Rabindranath Tagore, carefully packed in by my mother.

At the face of contrariness, I have also found strength in Rabindranath. During the last caretaker government regime, while I was imprisoned, I used to recite the holy Qur'an after my morning prayers. The rest of the time I spent reading books. And Tagore was in my reading list as he remained my constant source of inspiration.

The vice president of India Mr Hamid Ansari is present here today as a testimony of friendship of two neighboring nations joined by their mutual love for Tagore. The national anthems of both of these friendly nations are written by none other than Tagore.

Ladies and Gentle,

Tagore was born in Kolkata. But he spent most of his time in Patishor, Shelidaha and Shahzadpur in this part of Bengal. Although he came here to look after his estate, he was not like other landlords. He really took interest in the lives and lands of his people. The sun and soil of riverine Bengal has inspired him to write many memorable short stories, songs and poems. He has seen the people from a close proximity. He has worked for their welfare. In Patishor, for example, he introduced cooperative system and micro-credit scheme.

His urge to transcend the communal bondage and to become part of a greater humanity is also inspired by the bauls, the mystic street singers of Bengal. Lalon Shai, in particular, gave him an insight into a fraternity that was not distraught by factionalism. He has admitted his indebtedness to the bauls in many of his lectures or writings.

The other thing that needs to be mentioned here is his wedding. He got married to Bhabatarini, a girl from Dakhhindihi village of Khulna. After his marriage, Tagore named his wife Mrinalini.

We have already taken initiatives to commemorate the sites tinged with the memory of Rabindranath. The establishment of Rabindra University in Shelaidaha is in the pipeline. Steps to conserve the memory of the poet have been taken in Shahzadpur and Patishor. The celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of birth of Tagore in a befitting manner was declared in our joint communiqué, signed during my last visit to India.

The Railway Minister of India, Mamata Banarjee wrote to me earlier asking for a suggestion for the name of the train that would run between Dhaka and Kolkata as part of the communiqué. I immediately remember those famous lines:

"No room, no room, the boat is too small.  
Loaded with my gold paddy, the boat is full.  
Across the rain-sky clouds heave to and fro,  
On the bare river-bank, I remain alone -  
What I had has gone: the golden boat took it all."

My instant suggestion was, "Golden Boat". I am grateful to the Indian government for respecting my suggestion.

Ladies and Gentle,

Rabindranath is intertwined with all our efforts for struggle. The literary work of this first South Asian Nobel laureate has introduced Bengali before a global audience.

On a separate note, in 1948 young Mujib led the struggle to hold aloft the dignity of the mother language Bangla. The status of state language was earned on February 21, 1952 through the valiant sacrifices of language martyrs Salam, Barkat, Rafiq, Jabbar, Shafiq and many others.

Thanks to some expatriate Bengali, during its last tenure in the government, Awami League established February 21 as the International Mother Language Day. The fight for language

initiated the fight for independence. The Pakistani junta tried to ban Rabindranath in 1961. That plot was foiled by the people of the land. It is through struggles that we have learned to locate Tagore at the core of our hearts, our consciousness. It is with deep respect, I recall the contribution of those who resisted the plot against Rabindranath.

The clarion call for freedom by the father of the nation prompted us to overthrow the shackles of colonial rule. But it came through a heavy price of the sacrifice of 3 million people, and the Golden Bengal, envisioned by Rabindranath, was finally achieved.

During the tumultuous days of Liberation War, songs and poems of Rabindranath have inspired the freedom seekers to lay their lives for the ultimate liberty of the land. The inspirational influence of Tagore, the poet of love and prayer, made Bangabandhu endorse "My Golden Bengal. My Bengal of gold, I love you" as our national anthem, a song that is engrossed in the emotion and passion of Bengal.

We are indebted to Tagore for his recognition of women power. In "Shabola", Tagore reflected on the caged condition of women and asked:

Dear Lord  
Why wouldn't you let women  
Have the right to sculpt their own fate?

Tagore has created female characters such as Nandini in Raktokorobi, Shucharita in Gora, Bimala in Garey Bahirey and Ela in Chaar Odhaya who remain as icons of invincible women, breaking the stereotypes of Bengali women.

Tagore's rejection of knighthood in protest of Jalinwalabaag killing by the British army, his depiction of anti-British elements in Gora and Chaar Odhaya, and the spirited youth in Raktokorobi have inspired the youths to break the chains of captivity.

Tagore was not only a poet but also an educator and social-worker. His creation-Shantiniketan-now stands tall among all universities. His vision of education included agriculture, health education, cooperative and cottage industry that had led him to establish Shriniketan.

The country that Rabindranath deemed was free of poverty, hunger and illiteracy. He wanted to ensure the dignity of farmers and laborers. He wanted women to have their rights.

The same ideas were pursued by Bangabandhu. We believe, if a nation is lagging in economy, it will fail to excel in its cultural fronts, and its people will not be able to walk with their heads held high.

We would like to cherish the dreams of Tagore and Bangabandhu, and build a nation that is modern in outlook, secular in orientation, democratic in approach, and a true welfare state in all respect. As I have stated elsewhere, the main enemy for the people of South Asia is poverty--and we need to have concerted efforts to tackle hunger and poverty in the region.

Dear audience,

As long as Bengali language and nation thrive, we shall have Tagore as our guiding star. His creation, his dream and his vision cannot be restricted to any particular region. He has become a part of a universal consciousness that is not outdated even after 150 years of his birth.

In our everyday fight against the unholy and the untruth, in our moments of crisis, the one who remains by our side is Rabindranath. In his own words:

I woke by the shore of this beauteous form  
And came to know that  
This world is not a dream  
I see its form  
Scripted in a blood-stained letter  
And came to know my self--  
Blow by blow,

Pain after pain--  
Truth is harsh;  
I fell in love with truth  
Truth never deceives you  
Life is but a ceaseless worship of pain  
And we must payback all the debts of death  
And earn the favor of truth.

With these few words, let me thank you all and declare the programs on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of birth of Rabindranath Tagore open.

Khoda Hafez.

Joi Bangla, Joi Bangabandhu.  
May Bangladesh Live Forever.

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