International Conference on Kazi Nazrul Islam

Dhaka, June 24, 2011

NAZRUL ISLAM'S GREATNESS TODAY

Dear Friends,

In Kazi Nazrul Islam's spirit, I would like to start by very humbly expressing my gratitude to the organizers. I feel honored to have been invited to speak at this International Conference on Bangladesh's great national poet. There are very many Bangladeshi scholars whose academic knowledge regarding the legacy of your national poet is a hundred, if not a thousand times larger than is mine. Moreover, given my limitations in speaking Bangla, - my capacity to read and analyze Nazrul's poems and essays is quite limited. Hence, I am more than happy and grateful to the Nazrul Institute for having considered me worthy enough to be invited to speak at your Conference. I feel deeply indebted indeed.

1.

In my speech I intend to highlight Nazrul Islam's significance for the cause of human emancipation today. The Conference attendants may wonder what are my qualifications to speak out. I would therefore like to start by recalling how I first got acquainted with your national poet. This was in 1973, about one year after your country's liberation from Pakistani occupation. Before that, the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had brought the poet to Dhaka, and had elevated him permanently to the status of Bangladesh's national poet. In the beginning of 1973 I travelled to all corners of Bangladesh, to get to know your country's people and culture. While travelling around I marked that Nazrul Islam's picture figured everywhere in roadside teashops, along with portraits of Sheikh Mujib and of your renowned poet Rabindranath Tagore. I thus started realizing that in the eyes of the Bangladeshi people, Nazrul Islam's contribution to your national liberation was at par with that of Rabindranath and Sheikh Mujib. However, I had no inkling of the fact that Nazrul Islam had played a *prophetic* role, for Bangladesh and for the world at large. This I only got to understand better, when in 2007/2008 I did academic research at the *International Institute for Asian Studies*(IIAS) based in my hometown, Leiden, the Netherlands.

This International Conference has been called to celebrate Nazrul Islam's dramatic poem 'Bidrohi', 'The Rebel'. I take great pleasure in devoting some words to this poem. I should mention that it was friends belonging to the revolutionary underground who first told me about 'Bidrohi'. Those times – the period 1973-1975 – were marked by very sharp political conflicts in Bangladesh. Yet it is interesting to note that on all sides of the political divide – from the ruling Awami League to the far Left – there was equal regard for your national poet! As you who have gathered here know better than me, the poem "The Rebel' is steeped in religious-cultural symbolism. Written in the early 1920s, the poem had huge significance in

arousing people from stupor, i.e. in encouraging people to wage determined struggle against British colonial rule. Yet the poem can easily be misunderstood. For the significance of *'Bidrohi'* can only be assessed fully, if one is acquainted with the main personalities — including rebellious ones — who figure in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the two great epics of the subcontinent. One for instance has to know about *Parasuram*, who was the sworn opponent of the warrior caste of the *khatriyas*. And about *Bhrigu*, the rebellious sage who tested the three leading Gods of the Hindu pantheon, Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma, and dared poke a stick into the stomach of Brahma so as to wake him up. Clearly, Nazrul Islam's reading of the Hindu epics was far from homogenizing or 'Orientalist'!

Let me elaborate this point. The Orientalist discourse - in the Indian context - entailed a project that aimed at providing Hindu religion with a scriptural basis comparable to other world religions. This was an effort under colonialism in which both European scholars, notably the highly influential German scholar Max Mueller, and Hindu nationalists took part. Their endeavors focused on the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the great epics, which were put into writing long before, but had not been 'codified'. Hence the reference to the 'homogenizing' discourse of the Orientalists. But Nazrul Islam's artistic endeavors were far removed from those of the Orientalists. He was fully aware of the great popularity which the two great epics enjoyed among the masses in Bengal, - but his efforts to highlight Mahabharata Gods, heroes and saints had an entirely different meaning or purpose than theirs. In fact, it could be said that he read the epics 'upside-down'. For his efforts were entirely concentrated on making the deities play a role in favor of the growing nationalist resistance against the British. Thus, in poems such as 'Bidrohi' and 'Sudrer Majhe Jagiyeche Rudra', i.e. 'Rudra Has Risen Amidst the Toilers, the Sudras', he evoked the ascetic God of Destruction, Shiva/Rudra, in order to enhance the spirit of rebellion among the oppressed in Bengal. Says Nazrul in the latter poem: 'Rudra has risen amidst the toilers, the sudras, - the deity who shares our sorrows and sleepless nights'. And 'Hey, Rudra in the shape of ussudras, be saluted you are God the ferocious'. The peasants of Bengal are elevated to the status of God, and the God *Rudra*'s to that of great Arouser of the spirit of revolt.

2.

Dear friends, I now will focus on Nazrul Islam's contribution to defending religious tolerance. As the title of my speech indicates, I believe that Nazrul's life work has concrete meaning for suffering humanity today. Let me start by highlighting his method, his method aimed at promoting mutual understanding between people of different faiths, notably people belonging to the two large religious communities of Bengal, - Hindus and Muslims. As this Conference's attendants know well, Nazrul Islam very rapidly, like a comet, rose to fame and stardom in Bengal. The decade of the 1920s saw both the spread of powerful nationalist resistance against the British – the khalifat and non-cooperation movements - and the eruption of communal riots. Nazrul Islam was so deeply worried about the impact of the religious tensions that he wrote numerous poems and essays, aimed at countering the dangerous trend. As well known, the poet ultimately, in the 1940s was to succumb and become incapacitated, when he felt he was unable to avert a catastrophe. One of his most prophetic writings is the song/poem 'Kandari Hushiyar', 'Helmsman Beware', which he composed for the Conference of the Indian National Congress held in Krishnagar in 1926. This song/poem indicates he understood better than the Congress leadership that unless Hindus and Muslims would forge a 'heartfelt unity', a holocaust would inevitably take place. He already sensed, it seems, what would happen at Partition in 1947.

However, Nazrul Islam did not just speak out to condemn the communal riots as they occurred. He did not just warn Hindus and Muslims that by continuing to fight each other they threatened to undermine their own, their common cause. He also devised a method towards promoting religious unity that was, I don't hesitate to say, unique. For Nazrul Islam, as Bangladeshi academicians have rightly pointed out, extensively drew on both Islamic history and on the Hindu scriptures, so as to defend his cause of unity. Thus, in some poems Nazrul Islam spoke with great admiration of the Prophet Mohammad and of martyrs and heroes from the Middle East. Yet in other poems he spoke with very deep reverence about Gods and Goddesses belonging to the Hindu pantheon, such as the flute playing God of Love Krishna, representing the Vaishnavist mystic current; and the Goddess Anandamoyee who represents Sakti religion. Moreover, in numerous poems he directly juxtaposed Gods, Goddesses, incarnations and saints belonging to different faiths. I have recently translated some of Nazrul's poems which have not previously been rendered in English, being pushed to do so by my dear friends of the Nazrul Institute. Really, Nazrul's knowledge regarding the saints and symbolism of the world's religions is so extensive that it continues amazing me. For I hail from a society which for centuries has been oriented rather exclusively towards one single faith, i.e. Christianity.

Let me once again elaborate. For the theme of syncretism, i.e. that of the intermingling of religions, has to be 'problematized' as academic friends would say. Historically, the method of intermingling was refined in the Indian subcontinent by members of the Brahmin caste. When Buddhism was influential, in the post-Asoka period, they sought to extend the influence of their own Hindu religion by co-opting external deities. This became their chosen method aimed at drawing people from the adivasi, the tribal population of India, into the fold of Hinduism. Their idea was: you can achieve hegemony for your own religion, dharma, by allocating some space in your own religion to the deities venerated by people of other faiths. In Bengal, the Brahmin priests, though much later, did the very same. They, for instance, incorporated *Chandi*, the Goddess who severed her own head, and *Manasa*, the popular snake Goddess. Again, when the great Muslim mystic saints, the Sufis, undertook their missionary efforts in Bengal, from the 14th century onwards, they employed the same devise. They paid respect to Bengal's great Yoga-tantric and Vaishnavatraditions, even as they sought to broaden the appeal for their own mystic faith. Bengal's modern and farsighted poet Nazrul Islam employed the same basic method, but he had an *entirely different* objective in mind!! For by engaging in syncretism, he did not aim for the hegemony of any religion – not that of his own youth, Islam, nor that of any other faith. This is quite clear, for instance, from the wording he used in his testamentary statement, - his farewell speech to Bengal's Muslim Literary Association pronounced in 1941.

There is yet a third element in Nazrul Islam's method to defend tolerance that needs to be emphasized with force. In the early 1920s, Nazrul was editor of the biweekly 'Dhumketu', which sought to inspire the youth of Bengal to struggle for complete independence from colonial rule. It is highly significant that in the middle of the given decade he took on responsibility for the editorship of another paper, 'Langol', i.e. 'The Plow'. For this paper rather aimed at promoting class struggle by Bengal's industrial workers and peasants. As well-known, the paper was Left oriented and enshrined Nazrul's commitment to the cause of the Labour Swaraj Party, the precursor of the communist party in Bengal. In his 'Sramiker Gan', 'Song of the Workers', for instance, he bemoaned the endless slogging by miners, masons and coolies - workers who enabled their bosses to live luxurious lives, even as they themselves remained down-caste, living in dirt and dust. And he exhorted the workers to take up their hammers and pick-axes, to confront the sweaters who abused their toil. Surely,

Nazrul Islam's poems and songs were written at a very different time, in an era when the people of Bengal were yoked by colonial rule. Yet I have no doubt that, if alive today, Nazrul Islam would stand by Bangladesh's readymade garment workers who have been demanding five thousand *Taka* as a living wage; and he would stand by the workers of the hellish wharfs in Chittagong who slog to dismantle imported toxic ships and are daily at risk of losing their lives. For let us be outspoken about your great poet: he stood by all dispreviliged sections of society and deeply believed that harmonious relations between people of different faiths can only be maintained, if militant class struggle be waged.

3.

Having spoken out about Nazrul's method to promoting tolerance, I will now dwell further on his significance for today's world. Here I first wish to once more stress the point that the poet really speaks to people of all religions, - not just to people belonging to Islam and Hinduism, but also to Jews, to Christians and to Buddhists. In his writings he did comment on all the world's great religions! While obviously hailing from a Muslim background himself, he unhesitatingly juxtaposed the prophet Muhammad with Jesus Christ, with Guru Nanak and with Gautama Buddha. And he did not uphold other prophets superficially, but on the basis of his own reading, research and knowledge. This is beautifully demonstrated in his brief essay entitled 'Jiban Biggaen', 'Life Science'. In this essay ably translated into English by Sajed Kamal, - Nazrul comments on the universal value of human compassion, of people's capacity to empathize with and feel the suffering of other human beings. He speaks of the 'nobility of sorrow', and refers to the great example of Gautama Buddha, whose legacy today is being rediscovered even in the West. The essay 'Life Science' is based on the famous parable Kisa Gotami, in which the Buddha teaches a widow who is grieving over the loss of her baby to see beyond her own sorrow and realize hers is a part of humanity's common suffering. Clearly, Nazrul Islam was well aware of the universal significance of the Buddha's parable. He believed it contained a message relevant for people everywhere, and of all times!

Nazrul Islam's importance for today's world also follows from the way he projects the religion of his youth, Islam. I am sure most of you who have gathered for this Conference are aware of the fact that anti-Muslim sentiments have sadly mushroomed in Western societies in recent years. The report brought out recently by a high-level body formed under the Council of Europe highlights the problem well. The authors' group under the leadership of Germany's former Foreign Minister Joshka Fisher stated that 'there is growing hostility to Muslims throughout Europe', and 'rising intolerance towards immigrants and Muslims' throughout the continent. The report openly targets those who are primarily to be blamed, stating that 'the Far Right and racist political parties in Europe are using anti-Islamic rhetoric as a tool'. A clearcut example of the latter, to my own shame, is the Netherlands, the country where I live. Here, a Rightwing extremist party called PVV emerged as main victor in last year's parliamentary elections. Building on prejudices that have existed in Dutch society for centuries, the party's leader argues that Islam is inherently intolerant and inequal. When I was young (1950s/1960s) the Netherlands prided itself on being a standard bearer of religious tolerance. Today we sadly mark that a party abusing Islam and the country's Muslim minority population is *allied* to the current government.

Against the above background, Nazrul Islam's literary work bears great significance for today's world. For not only does your national poet advocate the need for social and economic equality. Not only does his poetry unequivocally state that he is opposed to the amassing of wealth by the rich at the expense of the poor. He also and with equal force argues that Islam is a religion of equality. For instance, in his poem 'Coming to this World for the Poor, the Downtrodden, the Destitute, Hazrat', he stated: 'You did not want that some shall be rich and some be beggars in the streets, that some have no place to live while some live in homes with golden terraces'. Moreover, contrary to what the Far Right in Europe falsely argues, - the prophet Mohammad was not an advocate of religious intolerance. Says Nazrul Islam about the prophet's legacy: 'Half the world came to believe in the virtue of toleration, in your virtue of toleration: but we never learned that toleration, only heard it, in the Quran and the Hadith. As the poem also brings out – Nazrul Islam was aware of the fact that a section of Muslims had turned intolerant. But his own message was humanitarian and bright. And precisely because he sought to project Islam as a religion of equality and religious tolerance, his literary work has great significance for Europe and for world at large, ridden as it is by religious strife.

4.

Nazrul Islam's ultimate significance for human emancipation today lies in the fact that as a committed artist, an artist-cum-activist, he provided an entirely different basis for the propagation of religious tolerance than has elsewhere been common in modern times. For Nazrul's drive, his original source of inspiration is entirely mystical. That means he believes a loving Spirit - which we could name Krishna or Anamdamoyee - pervades the whole universe. He believes that it is possible for each of us, individual human beings, to be united with or be absorbed in that spirit, in the great Void. Further, from his mystical position, he was highly critical of all established religions, including orthodox Islam. Says Nazrul in his worldhistoric poem 'Samyabadi', 'I Sing of Equality': 'Open your heart - within you lie all the scriptures, all the wisdom of all ages. Within you lie all the religions, all the prophets – your heart is the universal temple of all the gods and goddesses.' These words in a nutshell summarize Nazrul's position quite well, and in a very powerful manner. Some of us might think his mystical approach to religious tolerance is not scientific, that it has no implications for the science of politics. And it is true that most of the Western debates on religious tolerance historically have been structured differently. For mysticism was largely sidelined in the West's Christian discourse on tolerance. Yet there is no doubt in my mind that Nazrul's approach to religious tolerance has an enormously large importance for the science of politics. For through his artistic endeavors -ie. the poetry in which he spoke respectfully on *all* the world's faiths – he provided a unique defense for the democratic principle of religious tolerance.

Let me conclude with a brief summary on Nazrul Islam's world significance. During the past several centuries some philosophers and political thinkers in the West have tried to theorize the need for harmonious relations between people of different faiths. Some tried to do so by drawing on the scriptures of one particular religion, - or by calling respect for religious minorities a measure of democracy. Amidst international thinkers advocating tolerance Nazrul Islam stands out as exceptional. For whereas he was no doubt highly critical of established religions; whereas he decried the role of orthodox *mullahs* and priests, - Nazrul Islam in his poetry and speeches offered a spiritual message that was based on knowledge of and respect for *Vaishnava* Hinduism, *Sakti*dharma, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and other religious currents existing in the subcontinent in his days. And the position from which he did so was

above any particular religion. It was supra-denominational, as his famous 1941 farewell speech 'Jodi Ar Bashi Na Baje', 'If the Flute Does Not Play Any More', brings out perfectly well. It is very unfortunate that the life work of Bangladesh's national poet until today remains little known outside of Bangladesh. May this Conference help to propagate Nazrul's unique message throughout the world, so as to advance the cause of human liberation.

Once again my sincere gratitude to Professor Rafiqul Islam, to Mr. Rashid Haider and to other friends of the Nazrul Institute who have made it possible for me to visit Bangladesh this time.

Let's jointly work hard so as to ensure that your great national poet be recognized in the whole world. He truly is an exceptional advocate of tolerance and his message has universal significance!

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