

BOTTOM LINE

Why is Sonia's visit important?



BARRISTER
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THE president of India's ruling Congress Party Ms. Sonia Gandhi's visit to Bangladesh on July 24-26th has been hugely important and symbolises the existing warm relations between the two nations.

Sonia Gandhi hardly visits any foreign country. This was her first visit to Bangladesh at the invitation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to attend a conference on "Autism Spectrum Disorder and Development Disabilities in Bangladesh and South Asia" as the chief guest, although both her children -- Rahul and Priyanka -- visited Bangladesh to see the activities of Brac and Grameen Bank.

As the chief patron of Action Autism in India, her contribution on India's experience in autism disorder has been immensely helpful and rewarding to the deliberations of the conference.

During the visit she received the highest award of the nation "Bangladesh Freedom Honour" on behalf of her mother-in-law former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who was given the award posthumously.

The citation of the award reportedly reads: "Mrs. Indira Gandhi stood by the side of people of Bangladesh from the Liberation War despite various adversities...She played a great role in freeing Bangabandhu from Pakistani jail. Her contribution to Bangladesh's Liberation War will be remembered forever."

Although Ms. Sonia Gandhi did not visit Bangladesh before, she has been highly regarded in the country for various reasons. People like her abstemious life style and the way she has conducted herself in her country's political hotbed. She speaks Hindi fluently and with ease and wears traditional Indian dress in her adopted country.

Respect for her emanates from her public conduct, and when the Bangladesh government wanted to accord VIP status to her, she politely refused it as she claimed that she was neither the head of the state or of the government. This attitude aptly illustrates her exemplary conduct, which should be followed by others.

Sonia Gandhi has been politically powerful in India for many reasons, some of which may deserve mention:

- She belongs to the famous Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. The dynasty has produced three prime ministers in India. Many people see Sonia Gandhi's son Rahul as the future prime minister;
- Under her able stewardship, the Congress Party was rejuvenated across the country and won two successive national elections (2004 & 2009) and formed Congress-led governments. She is considered the key person in the party;
- People both inside and outside India are fully aware that she rejected popular request of her party supporters to become prime minister of India;
- Her rejection of the most important political post in 2004 demonstrates her strength of character and personal judgment of highest order because she did not allow the political opposition to exploit her Italian origin to disrupt the political scene;



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- Sonia Gandhi is important in the political firmament in her country as the President of the ruling of the Congress Party and President of United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which formed the Union government in New Delhi;
 - She is the chairperson of the Congress Party, which makes policy decisions that are in turn implemented by the Congress-led government. During the recent reshuffle of India's cabinet, her political weight and recommendation as the chairperson of UPA was felt;
 - US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, during recent visit to India, called on Sonia Gandhi and reportedly discussed bilateral, regional and global issues. This shows Sonia Gandhi's importance in Indian politics;
 - In 2004, Sonia Gandhi was the world's third most powerful woman, according to Forbes magazine.
- The Congress Party and the Awami League are the oldest parties in their respective countries. During the Liberation War, Awami League leaders had received moral, diplomatic and material assistance from the Congress-led government of Indira Gandhi.
- Furthermore, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi had been able to build a good personal rapport with each other. Bangabandhu's request for withdrawal of Indian troops from Bangladesh was agreed to by Indira Gandhi, and was completed by March 1972.
- It is coincidental that Bangabandhu's daughter was the prime minister of Bangladesh when a family member

of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, Sonia Gandhi, paid a visit as the President of the ruling Congress Party and Chairperson of UPA coalition government.

It is a unique feature in relations between the two nations that the national anthems of both were selected from the verses of the Nobel Laureate Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, and both countries recently celebrated his 150th birth anniversary with literary discussions, music, dance and drama written by him.

Her meeting as the President of the ruling Congress Party with President of the ruling Awami League Prime Minister Hasina afforded a unique opportunity to discuss bilateral issues and the way forward to their resolution.

Sonia Gandhi's visit has become all the more important because of the forthcoming visit of India's Prime Minister Dr. Singh on September 6-7. Her visit has raised high hopes for conclusion of a raft of agreements, including Teesta water-sharing, border demarcation and adversely-held enclaves, and further easing of Bangladeshi textile exports to Indian market.

In the aforesaid context, Sonia Gandhi's meeting with Sheikh Hasina has been crucial indeed because it is assumed that both must have discussed the working out of the "deliverables" by India during Singh's visit to Dhaka. We hope that her visit will further cement bilateral relations to the mutual benefit of the people of both the countries.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Unnoticed life saving structure

We can avoid these accidents and save scores of lives if Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) maintains the over-bridges properly. We should also implement strict rules about littering on the bridge and elsewhere. We should not be lax and lazy about using the over-bridge.

TAHMID SAMIUL MOWLA

THE lack of awareness in our country about "Safety and Hazards" has led to the loss of numerous lives. The recent tragic incident of Mirsarai-Abu Torab Bahumukhi High School led to the loss of 44 school-going children. It is not enough for us to just express our condolence at this great loss but rather to take apt steps to avoid this kind of sorrowful incident in the future. I pray so that all the departed souls rest in peace.

The word "accident" is a very common and familiar word that arouses fear in everyone. Accidents can take place anytime, anywhere, but most occur on the roads. Even if you are careful and vigilant an accident may occur.

When an accident occurs, the family of the deceased suffers the most. Not only that, if the victim is the breadwinner of the family, then the family becomes helpless.

About 2,000-3,000 people died annually due to road accidents in Bangladesh. A BRTA report that was published to compare and contrast the changing pattern of road accidents in Bangladesh illustrated that the number of casualties involved in these incidents kept on increasing from 1999-2007.

In order to stop this trend, we need to be cautious at all times. Most accidents involve drivers who are not authorised to be on the roads. Police should monitor these strictly and catch the drivers who are unauthorised or have fake driving licenses. It has also turned out that most of the bus and truck helpers are driving illegally.

A survey reveals that almost 40% of the road accidents that occur in the city involve pedestrians being hit as they try to cross the main roads. One solution to this problem is to use over-bridges to cross the roads. With a respect to our country's economy, building an over-bridge is expensive. They need to be built and maintained properly so that people can cross over safely.

Hawkers occupy a large portion of the over-bridge, making it difficult for the people to pass. Sometimes nauseating and filthy waste lies on the bridge. Many people also do not use over-bridges because of the poor lighting system, adding to their fear of being robbed. Furthermore, people do not use the over-bridges regularly due to their lazy and lax attitude. But what they do not understand is that just a few steps might save their life.

Most people think that crossing a free road is easier. But on a free road a driver is more likely to speed up and thus cause a major accident if someone is trying to cross the road at that moment. We often see people crossing the road just below an over-bridge. This is even more dangerous as the instinct of a driver is to speed up near an over-bridge thinking that all the passers-by are safely crossing the road using the over-bridge. Thus, the chance of an accident becomes more of a possibility.

Also, it is not possible to cross the roads with over-bridge because it is not possible to build one at every intersection. Nonetheless, it is the responsibility of the pedestrian to be vigilant at all times. A recent Daily Star article on multitasking pointed out that many people cross the road haphazardly, not taking into account what is in front of them or where they are going. This is likely to cause a fatal accident.

We can avoid these accidents and save scores of lives if Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) maintains the over-bridges properly. We should also implement strict rules about littering on the bridge and elsewhere. We should not be lax and lazy about using the over-bridge.

Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) should make it mandatory for heavy vehicles like-buses or trucks to install speed control governor. They can also introduce speed limits for the lanes on the roads. In addition, speed-breakers can be built in front of schools to further ensure road safety for the students. We should also have numerous police mobile courts at different parts of the city, not only to ensure public safety but also to catch the illegal drivers who are on the roads without proper authorisation.

As a person passes away, a whole family related to the person also ebbs away. Therefore, I would request everyone to use the over-bridge and also to create awareness in our society by encouraging people to use them. Keep well and stay safe.

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A self-defeating amendment

MOZAMMEL H KHAN

WHILE amending the charter, the difference between the constitution and an ordinary law must be understood. The constitution is the foundation of all laws for the state. It provides the framework, some elements of which may be irrevocable (e.g. Article 1-3 of the Turkish Constitution), for the organisation of government and establishes the stringent structure, referendum or 2/3 majority, needed to amend it, while so-called "ordinary laws" are the statutes enacted or abolished by the simple majority of legislative body. Constitutional amendment thus demands maximum possible national consensus and open public debates outside the legislature.

Although the amendment in question is a comprehensive package, beginning with the preamble to the abrogation of the 13th Amendment that constituted the caretaker government (CTG) system, the most contentious issue that gave rise to serious national debate and obviously infuriated the main opposition was the abolition of the CTG system.

Islam's status as the state religion was retained and the Arabic phrase "Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim" with its translation, "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful/ In the name of the Creator, the Merciful," was made a part of the constitution with the passage of the 15th constitutional amendment bill.

Several national constitutions, including those of Canada, Germany and Switzerland, make reference to God, most often in the preamble. Such invocations are found notably in several European constitutional traditions (reflecting the strong position of established churches in these countries and the tradition of invoking God in legal documents) and in the constitutions of many Islamic countries. In constitutional revisions, the inclusion or exclusion of a reference to God is frequently a point of great contention between believers and supporters of a secular state. Neither India, holder of the largest constitution, nor the United States, the country with the smallest constitution, make any reference to God in their constitutions.

These retentions on the one hand have drawn criticisms from the die-hard secularists while inclusion of "Creator" along with "Allah" in the translation has drawn violent protests from a section of so-called pro-Islamic groups. In this instance, the government was

probably guided more by pragmatism rather than idealism, taking into cognisance the emotional sensitivity that religion has in our society.

The amendment took a bold step against military takeover of state power and suspension or cancellation of any provision of the constitution by such usurpers. It made a provision for stringent punishment for such moves, terming them as "sedition." This was, of course, implicitly present in the constitution since there was neither any provision in it to promulgate martial law nor provision of its total suspension.

The usurpers, twice in the past, made their takeovers and misdeeds immune from prosecution through constitutional amendments rubber-stamped by a parliament created through managed elections. Fortunately, they have been declared void by the nation's highest court. Only the future will tell how this provision would work as a deterring measure to stop any potential adventurist.

The question that is boggling everyone's mind is, didn't the AL have anyone in its rank who could have dissuaded the party from descending itself into such a self-defeating course?

Articles pertaining to the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu containing, among others, his declaration of independence after midnight of March 25, 1971 and the proclamation of Independence declared at Mujibnagar on April 10, 1971, albeit a few opined them as redundant, were rightfully included and will avert any future non-AL government from tampering with it. History must take its rightful place once and for all after it was misrepresented, on and off, for forty years.

The Constitution of the Turkish Republic also refers to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in its preamble a similar way to how Bangabandhu has been referred to in the constitution. Inclusion of the "Proclamation of Independence" finds its precedence to a certain degree in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, the two most important and enduring documents in that nation's history. It has been said that the "Declaration of Independence was the promise; the Constitution was the fulfillment."

As indicated earlier, the most contentious element of the package is the annulment of the 13th amendment that stipulates a caretaker government to conduct the general election after the expiry of the tenure of the elected government. It was not a constituent of the AL's last election platform and as such the party did not have the mandate of the people to include it in the amendment package. The prime minister's insistence that the repeal was necessary after the Supreme Court struck down the 13th Amendment to the constitution as illegal is not tenable.

The response of the main opposition was swift and categorical. The BNP chairperson in her statement warned that political confrontation has become inevitable after parliament rescinded the constitutional provision that general elections be overseen by a non-partisan caretaker government. She said: "All the possibilities of holding free, fair, neutral and competitive elections are now gone." In this rare instance, it is difficult to disagree with her assertion.

The main opposition's stand on the issue, albeit outside the parliament, and the general views of the members of the public were absolutely bulldozed with the numerical strength in the legislature. Numerous political columns were written in the nation's leading news media forewarning the government about the consequence of such a self-defeating move. But all of them seemed to have fallen on deaf ears.

What lies ahead? If the BNP and its allies refrain from taking part in the next general election under the so-called interim government as newly incorporated in the constitution, will AL go ahead and conduct the election as BNP did in February 1996? In that likelihood, one does not have to be a Harold Laski to conjecture that AL is certain to meet a similar fate as was meted out to BNP in the aftermath of the so-called election. The question that is boggling everyone's mind is, didn't the AL have anyone in its rank who could have dissuaded the party from descending itself into such a self-defeating course? At the end, AL's self-perceived political triumph could very well turn into a self-induced political tragedy.

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