

PM's first foreign trips gave the right signals

The priorities are economic growth and development

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's maiden foreign visit to Malaysia and China, can be evaluated as strategic and successful. By going to Malaysia first, the PM avoided the speculation that he was giving China special priority, something that would no doubt irk quite a few of Bangladesh's foreign friends. It also gave credence to the PM's focus mainly on economic and developmental interests, while visiting both countries.

In Malaysia, one of Bangladesh's major Asian trading partners and expatriate labour destinations, discussions focused on reopening the labour market for Bangladeshi workers, improving migrant worker protection, and encouraging Malaysian companies to invest in Bangladesh. With remittances being one of the main sources of foreign exchange, progress in labour mobility will bring significant economic relief, if Malaysia agrees to the PM's request. The two countries also agreed to revitalise the long-inactive joint commission mechanism to accelerate economic cooperation and negotiations on a free trade agreement (FTA).

Later, during the four-day official visit to China, PM Tarique Rahman met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and many other high officials, accomplishing the goal diplomatically termed "deepening ties." Bangladesh signed 17 MoUs covering investment, infrastructure, industrial development, green technology, education, healthcare, and connectivity. Bangladesh also advocated for better market access to reduce the bilateral trade deficit, faster implementation of current projects, and more Chinese investment. Among the MOUs is an agreement with a Chinese state-owned company to develop an economic zone at Mongla. Besides, China is reportedly willing to work with Bangladesh to import more high-quality products from Bangladesh, support Chinese enterprises in investing in the country, and expand cooperation in emerging industries such as new energy, the digital economy, and artificial intelligence. Whether Bangladesh will be benefitted will of course depend on whether investment commitments are implemented.

From a diplomatic perspective, both visits are significant as they are the first foreign visits of PM Tarique Rahman and demonstrate Bangladesh's intention to pursue a diversified foreign policy while balancing relations with regional partners, especially India. They also indicate the BNP's traditional "Look East" policy, which may prove to be economically salient at a time when Bangladesh badly needs to boost investment and expand its labour markets. While a closer relationship with China may bring about developmental and economic boosts, Bangladesh will need to balance its relationship with other major partners including India, Japan, the US, and ASEAN countries. China's promise to support Teesta management, however, may be a sore point for India. Bangladesh will have to ensure that the latter is on board with it, as a water-sharing agreement with India is essential to ensure adequate water flow during the dry season.

Overall, both visits have ended on a positive note. The warm reception given to the PM by both countries and the number of MoUs signed, especially with China, are promising indicators of stronger bilateral relations. The success of these agreements, however, will depend on tangible results such as increased foreign investment, better employment opportunities, better project implementation, and steady economic growth.

A river we celebrate, but fail to protect

Microplastics in Halda's fish reveal institutional neglect

We have been discussing the dangers of microplastic pollution in our river systems for years now, so the report that microplastics were found in fish from the Halda River may not come as an immediate surprise. But it should alarm us that, despite repeated warnings, no substantial steps have been taken to control plastic pollution in our rivers, address microplastic contamination in our aquatic systems, or even to protect our rivers from being so callously encroached upon.

A joint study by researchers from the University of Dhaka and the University of Chittagong investigating microplastic pollution in fish from the Halda River found that all examined fish contained microplastics in their bodies. The researchers examined some 48 fish samples from eight species, and each fish had, on average, 6.5 microplastics in their digestive system and at least six microplastics in their muscle tissue. This is particularly worrisome given that plastic particles are no longer limited to fish digestive systems but have reached parts used for human consumption, indicating potential public health risks.

The study further found high levels of fibrous microplastic particles, which are believed to be linked to synthetic textiles and industrial discharges into the river. Such particles can accumulate toxic environmental chemicals and are believed to penetrate cells more deeply due to their shape, causing severe gut and lung damage. The source of this contamination can be explained by Halda's connectivity to several canals that carry both residential and industrial waste into the river, which gradually breaks down into small particles and enters the food chain. This raises several questions as to why untreated waste is still being allowed to enter our rivers, and how new industrial establishments are being approved without adequate safeguards for nearby water bodies.

Halda, being the country's only natural breeding ground for major carp species, is a vital ecological resource. The river has also been declared as the country's first "fish heritage" site, and restrictions have been imposed on fishing and other harmful activities. It is, then, deeply ironic that this river has been allowed to be held hostage by unchecked pollution and encroachment for years.

Microplastic contamination in our fish is not new. We have already seen hilsa and numerous fish and shellfish species in the Sundarbans being contaminated by microplastics. The latest study adds to growing evidence that our rivers have become repositories for plastic waste, and it also raises questions about the continued lack of regulatory oversight. We, therefore, urge the relevant government authorities to act while there is still time, before the damage in our rivers and their ecosystems results in an irreversible public health crisis.

Can tourist visa resumption mend our bilateral ties with India?



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Dinesh Trivedi did not have an easy entry into Bangladesh's public consciousness. Shortly after arriving in the country as India's new high commissioner on June 12, he was asked about the push-in crisis and the possibility of lifting restrictions on travel and trade. His answer was not what Bangladesh was waiting to hear. "India and Bangladesh share the same sky, the same air, the same pain," said Trivedi, the first politician to serve as India's high commissioner to Bangladesh. "I do not feel as though I have come to Bangladesh. Whatever is good for the 1.4 billion people of India and the 200 million people of Bangladesh—for these 1.6 billion people—is what will be done. We will take those steps in the future that are beneficial for both countries."

The sentiment was warm, even poetic. After all, it was an almost direct reference to Bhupen Hazarika's iconic song "Ganga Amar Maa, Padma Amar Maa." The response it provoked, however, was anything but desirable.

In Bangladesh, where questions of national sovereignty carry a particular sensitivity—shaped by the memory of 1971, and enduring anxieties about how the country is perceived and treated by its vastly larger neighbour—the remark was met with immediate suspicion. To many, it sounded like an echo of the "Akhand Bharat" sensibility that occasionally surfaces in BJP-aligned rhetoric. Whether Trivedi, who joined BJP in 2021 from Trinamool Congress, intended such a reading is beside the point. In diplomacy, perception often matters as much as intent.

But Trivedi followed that inauspicious opening with a move many perceive as positive.

Hours after presenting his credentials to President Mohammed Shahabuddin on Thursday, Trivedi announced that tourist visa services—processed across five centres in Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong, Sylhet, and Khulna—would resume from today.

Bangladesh-India relations have needed such a reset for some time. Since August 2024, when India suspended tourist visa services in the wake of the July Mass Uprising that ousted Sheikh Hasina's government, the bilateral relationship drifted under the weight of accumulated grievances on both sides. Anti-India sentiment surged across Bangladesh, fed by factors including, but not limited to, border killings and push-ins, misinformation in sections of the Indian media, and New Delhi's decision to shelter Hasina and a string of Awami League leaders.

So, the announcement of visa resumption is a welcome initiative on India's part.

But what if sidesteps is the reality on the ground. Even as Trivedi was announcing the reopening, the border remained a site of active hostility. According to West Bengal Chief Minister Suvenud Adhikari, approximately 10,000 people have been forcibly pushed into Bangladesh since May, with 1,800 more detained in Indian holding centres awaiting deportation. However, Bangladesh's official tally of receiving alleged "illegal migrants" from India is much lower.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Daily reports show India's Border Security Force (BSF) attempting to push people across the border while the Border Guard Bangladesh foils these operations, making the frontier a virtual war zone.

Besides, anti-Bangladesh rhetoric continues to emanate from influential quarters in West Bengal and across India's political discourse, which has real consequences. It shapes how ordinary Indians perceive Bangladeshis and creates a climate in which hostility—at immigration counters and in public spaces—may become culturally normalised, making the stay of Bangladeshis anywhere in India fraught with anxiety and insecurity.

To be sure, medical visas for

Yet, the restoration of tourist visa services does not automatically restore a welcoming environment for Bangladeshi visitors. If hostility towards Bangladeshis in India persists, especially in West Bengal, the resumption risks becoming little more than a formality. Also, reopening the service at five centres is a partial restoration, not a full one. Trivedi has acknowledged that expansion is planned, but plans must be followed by pace. A reopening that produces long queues and scarce appointments will not sustain the goodwill the announcement has generated.

More critically, the tourist visa alone cannot carry the full weight of a relationship that needs repair in

rhetoric. Bangladesh should receive that as a signal worth responding to, while remaining firm on demands that are legitimately its own, whether the demand is for accountability on border violence or for greater equity in the management of shared rivers.

Whether this recovery marks the beginning of a genuine change in direction remains to be seen. The harder questions in the Bangladesh-India relationship have not gone away, and the real test will be whether they are met with the same willingness to act that produced the visa decision, or whether, once again, they will be answered mainly with song lyrics that, in today's age, seem less like poetry than rhetoric.

How Bangladesh can make its university research budget work

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Imagine you are a faculty member at the University of Dhaka with a genuine research question. You need fieldwork and data. You may also need laboratory access, specialist equipment, or the ability to attend a conference where your peers can challenge your findings. You would want to produce something publishable, something that contributes to knowledge, and puts your institution on the map.

Now assume your annual research allocation is Tk 1 lakh. According to media reports, the University of Dhaka's last budget allocated Tk 21.57 crore to research across more than 2,000 teachers—roughly Tk 1 lakh per researcher. This year's university-level figures are not yet public, but the proposed national budget already shows a pattern: it consolidated Tk 200 crore of university research money into a single UGC fund.

However, centralising the fund does not change how it will be divided; it just changes who holds the cheque book before the same old norms take over. That amount covers a field trip, a journal subscription, or a modest data exercise, not the sustained, collaborative research universities are meant to produce. Essentially, spreading research money equally across all faculty means treating the allocation like a salary supplement rather than an investment.

Approximately Tk 11.5 crore, just over half the budget, could fund ten structured overseas doctoral partnerships at roughly Tk 1.1 to Tk 1.2 crore each, covering three years of tuition and maintenance. The University of Dhaka, like many public universities in Bangladesh, often appoints lecturers before they have acquired a doctorate, with a study leave abroad taken later on. This is the population the funding stream would serve. But not through the conventional model of sending someone abroad and hoping they return. Each publicly funded PhD scholar should remain connected to Bangladesh throughout their degree: attached to a home department, co-supervised by a Bangladeshi academic, publishing with Bangladeshi institutional affiliation, and returning for structured visits.

The remaining Tk 10 crore could

fund something Bangladesh does not yet have: a competitive internal research grant programme built around a qualification that also does not yet exist here: the Master of Research (MRes).

The MRes is not a taught degree, and it is not an MPhil. It sits between a coursework masters and a doctorate, designed specifically to develop early-career researchers through a year of supervised original research. Students review the literature, write a research grant proposal, generate and analyse data to produce results, present their findings at a conference, and submit a manuscript to a peer-reviewed journal. MRes students graduate with the skills, habits, and outputs of a working researcher.

Here is how the model could work in Bangladesh. PhD-holding faculty members would compete openly for internal research grants of between Tk 5 lakh and Tk 30 lakh, depending on the nature and cost of the project. Each faculty member may submit only one proposal per year. A selection body with external peer review would choose up to 75 projects from across the university. Each winning supervisor would then advertise their project and select an MRes students through open competition. Selected candidates would receive a full research studentship, maintenance support, and project costs covered.

Administration and research training would run centrally, at the university or faculty level while supervision would happen in the home department.

In a single academic year, this model could generate up to 75 original research projects, 75 MRes graduates with real outputs, and 75 faculty members who have written, defended, and delivered a competitive grant proposal. Some graduates could move on to MPhil degrees and doctoral study; others will take up research roles in government and scientific institutions, where the MRes should be recognised as a marker of their research readiness. The numbers here focus on one university, and they are indicative rather than precise: a ballpark to illustrate the principle, not a finished budget.

This model can be applied to any public university in Bangladesh. The logic is the same everywhere: concentration and competition produce research; equal distribution of research allocation across thousands of faculty members produces very little. Bangladesh does not necessarily need to invest more in university research. It needs to spend what it already has as if research were meant to generate tangible outcomes. The UGC's newly consolidated fund can be the first real test of whether that logic changes or simply moves to a single address.