

## **Sonia Gandhi's visit to Dhaka**

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Congress President Sonia Gandhi's whirlwind 24-hour visit (24-25 July) to Dhaka has left deep impression on the people of Bangladesh. Her statements and conduct won admiration from the people.

She praised Bangladesh "Hilsa" fish and sweet yoghurt and talked about admiringly Bangladesh's record in reduction of child, maternal mortality rates and empowerment of poor women through micro-credits.

That the fact that she politely refused to accept the VVIP status (earmarked for heads of state/government) from the government of Bangladesh demonstrated her sound judgment and attitude towards her life impressed ordinary citizens of the country.

Sonia Gandhi was given a red carpet treatment. Her popularity and image in Bangladesh emanates from the fact that she is the daughter-in-law of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, former India Prime Minister who had a seminal and singular role in the Liberation War in 1971 by Bengali people to liberate from the brutality and oppression of Pakistani army. She had a major contribution to save the life of the founder of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, popularly called 'Bangabandhu'.

The immediate purpose of the visit was to attend the Conference on Autism Disorder as the Chief Guest and as the patron of Action Autism in India, Sonia supported the proposal of creating a South Asian network of collaboration in autism disorder among children.

Sonia, on behalf of her mother-in-law former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, received the nation's highest civil award " Bangladesh Freedom Honour" from the President of Bangladesh Mohammed Zillur Rahman at a special ceremony at the Bangabhavan.

The award was given posthumously and 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."

Accepting the honour award on behalf of her mother-in-law Indira Gandhi, Sonia said that Bangladesh and India could cooperate with each other in the spirit of mutual respect and equality for greater common good of the people of the two countries. She further added: " That is what Indira Gandhi would have wanted and this is what I hope we will constantly endeavour to do".

She remains at the centre of political power in her country because she wears two-hats— one is the President of the Congress Party and the other is the Chairperson of the UPA --

which has formed the coalition government. She is an elected Member of Parliament in the Lok Sabha.

Although she is not in the governmental position, political leaders within India and outside know where the real power lies and they meet Sonia Gandhi. In recent times, the US Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton met Sonia Gandhi in New Delhi and had closed door meeting. This demonstrates that how powerful Sonia is.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to New Delhi in January 2010 ushered in a new era of fresh thinking, fresh vision and fresh agenda between the two countries and the 51-point Joint Communique issued after the visit described a comprehensive framework of partnership in all possible areas between the two nations.

The thrust of friendly relations started from the visit and gradually and steadily Indo-Bangladesh relations have been blossoming at the desired level, although at times slow but nevertheless proceeded steadily at the official level to implement the agreed decisions.

Ms. Sonia's visit assumed importance because the visit came ahead of Dr. Singh's visit to Bangladesh in September. His visit has raised high hopes for conclusion of a raft of agreements, including Teesta water-sharing, an agreement on border demarcation and adversely-held enclaves and further easing of Bangladeshi textile exports to Indian market. The expectations were based on statements by Indian External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna during his visit to Dhaka in early July.

In the aforesaid context, Sonia Gandhi's meeting with Sheikh Hasina, on the sidelines of the two-day international conference on Autism Disorder on Children, has been crucial. They reiterated unanimous opinion about concerted efforts among the South Asian nations to root out militancy and terrorism from the region. They also described the existing friendly relations as "very excellent" and hoped that the bilateral relations would be further strengthened in the future.

Both Sonia Gandhi and Sheikh Hasina belong to famous political dynasties which ruled respective countries. It is coincidental that Bangabandhu's daughter Sheikh Hasina is the Prime Minister of Bangladesh when a close family of Nehru-Gandhi dynasty Sonia Gandhi paid a visit as the President of the ruling Congress Party and Chairperson of UPA coalition government.

We hope that Sonia Gandhi's visit will further cement bilateral relations to the mutual benefit of their people.

