

Rahul Gandhi in Bangladesh

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Indo-Bangladesh relations are so pervasive and multi-dimensional that exist independently of governments and policies. The arrival of Rahul Gandhi in Bangladesh on 1st August for a visit of five days to get first-hand knowledge of the activities of Bangladesh Rural Advancement Centre (BRAC) in various sectors and micro-finance projects of Grameen Bank is a testimony to this fact.

BRAC's activities include micro-finance, women's empowerment, community health, education, legal and human rights protection, and rural programmes. The 38-year-old leader will also visit some projects of Grameen Bank whose founder and Nobel laureate Mohammed Yunus had met him in Delhi last year.

By visiting BRAC projects, Rahul will join a long list of high-profile personalities including former US President Bill Clinton, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Microsoft founder Bill Gates.

Rahul will be able to witness the projects of these two pioneer organisations and will form an idea how these two organisations brought and involved grassroots poor people to address three sets of issues of development, namely, opportunity, empowerment and personal security. Empowerment creates innovation, creativity and improvement.

Brief Profile of Rahul Gandhi:

Rahul, a popular male name in India, has a variety of meanings. The earliest meaning found in the Upanishads is "conqueror of all miseries". Later use of the word is attributed to the Buddha, who named his son Rahul as he felt that family ties could be an obstacle in the path to renunciation and nirvana. Rahul means "Moon" in Sanskrit.

Although to informed people, he does not need any introduction, Rahul Gandhi is a young 38 year member (born [19 June 1970](#)) Indian politician and member of the [Parliament of India](#), representing the [Amethi](#) constituency, Uttar Pradesh. Many people look up to him as the future Prime Minister of India at a certain point of time, if the Congress Party holds on power at the centre.

He is the son of current [Congress President Sonia Gandhi](#), and former Prime Minister [Rajiv Gandhi](#), who was [assassinated](#) in 1991. He was only 14 when his grandmother was assassinated in 1984.

Rahul completed a four-year BA course in Economics at Harvard University but transferred later due to security reasons to Rollins College in Florida where he completed a B.A. in 1994. He received an M. Phil in Development Economics after attending Trinity College, Cambridge.

In March 2004, he announced his entry into politics by announcing that he would contest the May 2004 elections, standing for his father's former constituency of [Amethi](#) in [Uttar Pradesh](#) in the [Lok Sabha](#), India's lower house of Parliament. Before that, his uncle [Sanjay](#) held the seat before a plane crash. The seat had been held by his mother until she transferred to the neighbouring seat of [Rae Bareilly](#).

In his first interview with foreign media, he portrayed himself as a uniter of the country and condemned "divisive" politics in India, saying that he would try to reduce [caste](#) and [religious](#) tensions. His candidacy was greeted with excitement by locals, who had a long standing affinity with the family's presence in the area.

Years later, some of his remarks became controversial, for examples, Rahul Gandhi counted the [1971 break-up](#) of Pakistan among his family's "achievements". This statement invited criticism from several political parties in India, as well as from notable people in Pakistan including the Pakistan Foreign Office. He said if anyone from the Gandhi-Nehru family had been active in politics then, the [Babri Masjid](#) would not have fallen in 1992.

Possible Implications of his visit for Bangladesh:

Observers note that since April last year, the relationship between India and Bangladesh has been productive. Among the achievements were the start of the Maitri Express between Kolkata and Dhaka in April 2007 and the visit of the Chief of Army Staff of Bangladesh, Lt. Gen. Moeen U. Ahmed. Furthermore, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee had visited Bangladesh twice in the last year.

General Dipak Kapoor, the chief of Indian army, just completed his visit to Bangladesh from July 28 to 31st.

Rahul, as a politician, is mindful that the 21st century will be quite unlike that of the 20th century. New forces are emerging to shape the political and economic contours of global powers. During the 21st century, Bangladesh and India have joined the parade of nations that seek to judge themselves according to standards of development compared quantitatively and internationally under the charter of eight Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

Furthermore, the geo-political scene around South Asia is changing. Economic globalization has made it compelling that Bangladesh and India must seriously consider in putting their relations on a mature partnership on economic, social and political level. India needs Bangladesh as much as Bangladesh needs India in the current regional and global environment.

Rahul must be aware of the pending bilateral issues that have stood in the way in forging an ideal relationship between Bangladesh-India relations. It is normal that neighbouring countries will have issues between them but what is imperative is to resolve them

peacefully and within a time-bound framework. One of the stable relationships is the US-Canadian one, although they are not free from bilateral issues.

There is a perception in Bangladesh that India is more conscious of its position as a regional power than of her responsibilities to her neighbours including Bangladesh. What is missing in Indo-Bangladesh relations appears to be the mutual trust and confidence on each other.

Let me cite a few examples:

Observers believe that border fencing by India across 4025 kilometres of Bangladesh border is most unhelpful to bilateral relations. It shows arrogance of India's power and its insensitiveness to the sentiments to people of Bangladesh.

Although India claims some of the undesirable activities along the border have temporarily been halted, the human cost is incalculable. It is reported that human lives are lost at the border almost every week (it is reported that since January until 23 July of this year, BSF killed 78 Bangladeshi people including two BDR Jawans).

Furthermore, the damage caused to psyche of Bangladeshi is immeasurable and in the long run no fenced- border can achieve its purpose for which it has been erected.

Second, deficit of trade (about 2 billion dollars in formal trade) has added another political problem between the two countries. India is not seen as amenable to Bangladeshi request as it should be. India's insistence on large percentage of value addition to rules of origin of Bangladeshi product makes some of the attractive offers for export to India meaningless.

For India, the economic cost is negligible if rules of origin are reduced because of its larger diversified economy. India's GDP is the second largest among 147 developing countries. It is the seventh largest exporter of food grains in the world.

If economy of Bangladesh improves, it is better of India primarily for two reasons, Bangladesh middle class will provide a good market for India and secondly, both countries can gradually integrate their economies into each other during the days of economic globalization.

Observers acknowledge that Bangladesh has been unusually guarded against giving facilities or concessions to India because it is highly sensitive to the possibility of its yielding more to India than it perceives necessary under the existing political environment.

Bangladesh government perceives that it should carry people with it in giving facilities to India provided India resolves first some of its bilateral issues directly affecting its people, such as, water sharing and fixing riverine boundaries.

Observers believe that confidence-building measures must receive the top priority in putting bilateral relations on the right track and it must first come from India, the biggest neighbour with largely endowed resources.

The bilateral irritants need to be resolved through meaningful dialogue. Both countries require in making the same political, bureaucratic, intellectual, educational, cultural and media effort on positive features of each other. Often some media in both countries highlight negative images of each other.

We hope that the visit of Rahul Gandhi will be a catalyst for ending the impasse created in some of the most pressing bilateral issues, such as, implementation of Sheikh Mujib-Indira Gandhi land border agreement of 1974, water sharing and management of common rivers, fixing boundaries of common rivers with geographical coordinates, and delimitation of maritime boundaries in the Bay of Bengal.

Let there be fresh thinking, fresh vision and fresh agenda, similar to the freshness of Rahul in politics to forge new relations between the two countries.