

Rahul Gandhi surprises many with Golden Temple visit

Congress party general secretary Rahul Gandhi surprised many people Monday by making an unscheduled visit to the Harmandir Sahib, the sacred shrine at the Golden Temple complex, in this Sikh holy city.

Rahul Gandhi, son of Congress president Sonia Gandhi, arrived at the shrine just before 7 a.m.

Clad in a white kurta-payjama and wearing a saffron headscarf, Rahul Gandhi remained inside the sanctum sanctorum for nearly 25 minutes and sat down quietly behind the 'raagis' (religious hymn singers) to listen to hymns.

Congress sources said he also went to the community kitchen to partake in 'langar'. He was not given a 'siropa' (a religious honour normally given to all visiting VIPs) by the priests at the holy shrine.

Though accompanied by his Special Protection Group (SPG) officers in plain clothes, Rahul Gandhi kept the visit strictly private and confidential. Even the local police did not have much idea about the high profile visit.

R.P. Meena, the border range inspector general of police, told IANS: 'I have no idea about his visit. I don't know anything about it.'

Rahul Gandhi had a scheduled visit to Punjab lined up from Monday till Wednesday but going to the Golden Temple here was not on his original programme. Congress sources said his visit to the shrine took them by surprise.

'He was supposed to arrive straight in Chandigarh (Monday morning) and then get on with his engagements and hold road shows in 17 (out of 20) districts in Punjab over the next two days. However, he flew into Amritsar and headed for the Golden Temple,' a local Congress leader told IANS.

Incidentally, Rahul Gandhi's visit to the shrine got covered live on a TV channel by default as the morning hymns are telecast live on that channel. Ruling Akali Dal leaders in Punjab have stakes in the Punjabi TV channel.

Rahul Gandhi's grandmother and former prime minister Indira Gandhi had ordered the June 1984 army assault on the Golden Temple, known as Operation Bluestar, against Sikh militants who had made the temple complex their sanctuary at the height of the Sikh separatist movement.

Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards Oct 31, 1984 in what was widely seen as retribution for the temple assault.

Radical Sikh organisation Dal Khalsa termed Rahul Gandhi's visit a private affair.

'We do not want to comment on it. He has not said anything there. It was a completely private visit. He offered no apology for his grandmother's actions in 1984. We should not assume anything from his visit. It would have been better if he had apologised,' a Dal Khalsa spokesman told IANS.

Dalmegh Singh, secretary of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) that manages the Golden Temple and other Sikh shrines in the state, told IANS: 'I cannot comment on his visit. I don't know if he came there this morning. The SGPC has nothing to do with his visit.'

Rahul Gandhi later went to the Hindu Durgiana temple here. He also went to the historic Jallianwala Bagh and paid respects to the martyrs of the April 13, 1919 massacre by British forces.

Gandhi's brother-in-law Robert Vadra had also visited the Golden Temple a fortnight ago. Vadra had come on a private visit with two other friends, with whom he has business interests near Jalandhar.

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