

## Indira Gandhi and Indo-Sri Lankan relations

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### Abstract

India and Sri Lanka have always been good neighbors as well as friends. Their approach towards the bilateral problems is thoroughly peaceful. India in the beginning tried to behave like a big brother but soon the Indian leadership realized that this fact would unnecessarily create bad blood between the two countries. The Indo-Sri Lankan problem of the Tamil emigrants over the years has consumed a lot of time and energy of the leaders of both the countries. But the efforts did bear fruit, resulting in signing a number of agreements to solve this ticklish problem. It has been partly solved and both the governments are keen to remove this irritant. The minority problem is closely related with the Indo-Sri Lankan issue. The nature of the problem has automatically involved the Government of India in it because of the Tamils living in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The Government of Tamil Nadu has raised a hue and cry when large scale clashes were reported between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka. It is an established fact that the Government of India has always considered the issue as an internal affair of Sri Lanka and did not try to indulge in it. The Indian leadership has shown her concern from time to time whenever the situation took a grave turn. As far as India-Sri Lanka relations are concerned, given its disparate power equation with Sri Lanka, coupled with the propensity of the Sinhalese to suffer from the small power complex and the "Tamil" factor in bilateral relations, particularly during 1983-84, Sri Lanka will continue with the greater alacrity for the maximisation of its external options to diversify its linkages with the extra regional powers. Sri Lanka will continue to harp on the issue of its autonomy, sovereignty and integrity vis-a-vis India as and when so impelled.

India thus has entered a new phase in its relationship with Sri Lanka which is marked by over suspicion as well as apprehension and a distant cordiality. This phase continued in the eighties. The main thrust of India's Sri Lanka policy should continue to be accommodation of the domestic political and economic pressures in Sri Lanka. At the same time, in view of Sri Lanka's emphasis on the regional dimensions of bilateral economic relations, India's Sri Lanka policy should be closely related to the regional context. India's Sri Lanka policy should necessarily compromise aid policies to stimulate trade not only with India but also in the Asian region. It should also provide for economic linkages between the two countries that would make for the maximum utilization of resource endowments in the two countries. Since the two countries became independent, India has been able to manage its sub-national conflict and present the Tamil ethnic issue from assuming a traditional dimension.

The main thrust of the Government's policy was governed by the assumption that India would play an effective and useful role in the world community only if it has peaceful, friendly and productive relations with the neighbouring countries. Neighbourhood diplomacy aimed at generally creating a climate of confidence essential for greater concentration on the developmental priorities during Mrs. Gandhi's period. There was a good deal of continuity followed by the Janata Government in maintaining relations with the Sri Lankan government. With the reemergence of Mrs. Gandhi to power in 1980, there was not much deviation from the basic principles on which Indian foreign policy had been based?

**Keywords:** India-Sri Lanka relations, Indian leadership, autonomy, sovereignty, etc.

### Introduction

India and Sri Lanka are socially, culturally and politically linked with each other. Both were British colonies and attained freedom almost at the same time. But the freedom movement in Ceylon was not as hot as in India and the Britishers had vacated Ceylon not because they were asked to do so but the geo-political compulsions compelled them to leave because it was not possible to rule over Ceylon while sitting in London<sup>[1]</sup>. When Ceylon became free, the whole of the world was divided into two blocs and each was trying hard to control the newly emerged independent countries in Asia and Africa. India's ties with Sri Lanka are rooted in deep history and mythology. The island just across the southern coast of India forms part of what we generally refer to as South Asia. Like the Northern Hindus and the Muslims of

Western Pakistan, the Sinhalese and the Tamilians of the South are hardly distinguishable in their appearance<sup>[2]</sup>.

### Background

In its historical setting, the geographical configuration of India and Sri Lanka has been a compulsive factor in relation between the two countries. This is but natural, considering that the Indian peninsula is the nearest landmass to a lonely island in the Indian Ocean. What is of consequence is that in view of the nature of the interaction between the two Sri Lanka has felt the need to assert its identity again and again in history without being able to sever its links with the mainland, even when it wanted to do so, in different sectors and at various levels.

This ambivalent nature of the relations between the two countries is reflected, rather poignantly in the observation, now become trite, that if India brought salvation to Sri Lanka, it also brought it sorrow. Thus memories of the advent of Buddhism and the arrival of Mahendra in Sri Lanka still lingers as constructive pattern of interaction between the two countries [3]. On the other hand, there are the unpleasant memories of repeated invasions from South India. These memories are responsible for a miasma of misgiving in the Sinhalese mind, now compounded by its perception of India as an independent nation state with a power potential that is immense compared with that of Sri Lanka. While Sri Lanka continues to look upon North India as the cradle of its religion, it perceives its contacts with South India, particularly with Tamilnadu, as having been by their very nature a source of perennial concern for its integrity as a nation state.

It is not therefore surprising that successive governments in the island have felt concerned about the ability of the Indian political system to contain its sub-national Tamil ethnic element and prevent its coalescence with its counterpart element in Sri Lanka. The leaders of Sri Lanka have often enough expressed the fear that if New Delhi should fail to exercise its authority over Tamilnadu, or to prevent Tamil sub-national aspiration eventually from leading to the succession of Tamilnadu as Dravidastan, the Tamil ethnic element in India and Sri Lanka would drive the Sinhalese to the wall and make them a minority in the Island [4]. If India's integrity is thus of immense consequence to Sri Lanka, so is the island's to India. For obvious strategic reasons, any instability in the island that might provide a pretext to extra-regional powers to build a bridge-head, there is not a prospect which India can afford to ignore [5].

The most serious issue that troubled relations between the two countries immediately after independence was the problems of the status of persons of Indian origin in Sri Lanka. After prolonged talks at various levels, an agreement was finally hammered out on 30th October, 1964, during the visit of the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Bandaranaike. Known as the Sirimavo-Agreement, it provided for the repatriation to India of some 550,000 persons of Indian origin and as a first step their provision with Indian passports, the grant of full citizenship to another 300,000 of them left the future of some 150,000 stateless persons to be decided later through mutual discussions. The agreement also provided for a time-span of 15 years for the agreement to be fully implemented so that no unnecessary hardship was caused in the process [6]. A census taken in 1986 confirmed the figures about persons of Indian origin in Sri Lanka mentioned in Sirimavo-Shastri Agreement. The census found a total of 975,000 stateless persons of Indian origin [7] that is nearly a million people out of a population of some 10 million. In Ceylon the government of Mrs. Bandaranaike lost power and in its place came a UNP-led coalition government headed by Dudley Senanayake, one in which were represented some of the parties like the (Tamil) Ceylon Federal Party which represented essentially the interest of the people of Indian origin. Senanayake was, therefore, expected to take a more benign and humane

attitude towards their problems. He had already discussed the question of implementation of the Indo-Ceylon accord with the representatives of the Indian parties in early 1966 [8].

On 6 December the Ceylonese Prime Minister introduced the Indo-Ceylon Agreement implementation bill in the House of Representatives. It gave the right to all those to whom the agreement applied to seek Ceylon citizenship, but left the sole discretionary power to grant in the hands of the minister concerned. Those granted citizenship would be given the status of "citizen of Ceylon by registration" [9]. Some of those provisions caused misgivings among the Indians there as well as in many circles in India [10]. Another issue threatening the cordiality of the relationship was a territorial dispute that arose during this period (1968) over the title to one-square mile uninhabited island, called Kacchativu, off the Jafna coast in the Palk Straits [11].

### **Common links and conflicting approaches**

The Government of Sri Lanka did not like the Soviet Union and its allies and considered Britain to be a safe and trustworthy friend because the people of Sri Lanka were not annoyed with the Britishers. During the II World War, British ships and planes had defended Sri Lanka from the attack of the Japanese. The people of Sri Lanka had also a word of praise for the parliamentary system prevailing in Britain. Sri Lanka was keen to be the active member of the Common Wealth because she felt that membership of Common Wealth would provide them an opportunity to discuss their problems. Britain and Sri Lanka, in order to give some form to their relationship, signed defence agreement. The agreement met criticism in Sri Lanka but the government maintained that the agreements were in no way a threat to the external sovereignty [12].

India was also a colony of the Britishers like Sri Lanka but it did not like to establish any close or special relations with them. India is a member of Common Wealth and recognises the Queen of England as only the symbolic head of the Common Wealth but the Government of Sri Lanka considered the Queen of England as the Queen of Sri Lanka. The attitude of Sri Lanka towards the Soviet Union was another area where both the countries had conflicting approaches.

Some drastic changes took place in the foreign policy of Sri Lanka under the leadership of Bandaranaike (leader of the People of Sri Lanka, 1956). He, before assuming the office of the Prime Minister, had declared in the House of Representatives that Sri Lanka should adopt neither anti-West nor pro-West but pro-Ceylon foreign policy [13]. His views clearly reflected that he wanted Sri Lanka to be a non-aligned and to follow an independent line of thinking.

### **Common links between India and Sri Lanka**

Both India and Sri Lanka have common geographical, cultural, social and historical links. Because of her geopolitical situation Sri Lanka naturally had close contacts with India since the dawn of history. Twenty miles of shallow sea today separates Dhanushkadi in India and Talaimannar in Sri Lanka. The common socio-

religious links between the two countries are operating at two different levels - the regional and the national. Buddhism is widely spread in Sri Lanka. Hinduism which has been accepted and widely respected by the majority of the people in India is regarded a minority religion in Sri Lanka because only a small number of people follow it <sup>[14]</sup>. Another dimension of close cultural relations has its roots in the Tamil language, which is the main language of the people living in Tamil Nadu as well as that of the inhabitants of the Northern and Eastern provinces, which are in close proximity to the Tamil speaking state across the Palk Straits of Sri Lanka <sup>[15]</sup>. The Socio-religious - historical links between the two in fact are at the root causes of some of the bilateral problems such as the Tamil issue and the Indo- Sri Lankan problem. Because of these common links the relations of the two polities are quite friendly and both believe in the amicable solution to the bilateral problems.

### **The Image of India in Sri Lanka**

In spite of close links, the Government of India has never tried to interfere in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka and has always treated Sri Lanka on equal terms whenever and wherever the interaction between the two took place. During the discussion in the first Common Wealth Prime Ministers Conference, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka D.S.Senanayake clashed often with the Prime Minister of India, Nehru. John Kotelawala, another Prime Minister of Sri Lanka had anti-Indian feelings in his mind. He was much interested in strengthening Sri Lanka's relations with Britain than with India.

### **Sri Lanka and Sino-Indian War of 1962**

In the face of Chinese aggression in 1962, the Government of India looked out for sympathy and support all over the world. It received political and substantial material support from the old Common Wealth countries which were members of the Western bloc. Pakistan was the only exception which followed the path of expediency and equivocation <sup>[16]</sup>. On the contrary, the reaction of Sri Lanka towards the war was somewhat surprising. Sri Lanka wanted to remain neutral and did not want to antagonize China or India by siding with either of them. In a letter to the Indian Prime Minister, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka expressed concern over the deteriorating situation in the area and showed her deep concern over the question, which if not solved, might endanger the peace and security of the world <sup>[17]</sup>. Sri Lanka, being a non-aligned country, did not condemn China as an aggressor. At the initiative of the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka a conference of six non-aligned Asian-African nations met in Colombo from 10 December to 12 December, 1962, to help bring about a peaceful solution to the Sino-Indian border conflict. The participants were Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, UAR and Ghana <sup>[18]</sup>. At the end of the three day conference, it asked Mrs. Bandaranaike to visit Delhi and Peking to convey the proposals to the Indian and the Chinese Governments <sup>[19]</sup>. When the whole world condemned Chinese aggression, a neighbor with close social, religious and cultural ties, did not dare to speak a single word against the aggression.

### **Bilateral Problems between India and Sri Lanka**

India and Sri Lanka have faith in the peaceful solution of the bilateral problems. Ever since their emergence as independent countries both have successfully solved some of the bilateral issues. The various patterns of interactions between the people and the politics of Sri Lanka requires, as a backdrop, (a) a perusal of its socio-cultural pluralism (as reflected in terms of race, religious, language, caste and family); (b) the nature of tenor of its communicational web; (c) the demographic patterns and trends to the extent they have assumed a criticality in the developmental processes of the country; and (d) the implications and the impact of the India's factor in its historic-cultural development.

### **Indo- Sri Lankan Problem**

The Indo- Sri Lanka problem has always been a topic of discussion for the Government of India and Sri Lanka but no satisfactory solution has yet been found. The Indians started moving to Sri Lanka in large numbers from 1839 to work as labourers on the developing coffee plantations. The volume of migration also varied from year to year depending upon the internal economic conditions of the two countries <sup>[20]</sup>. After 1900, the emigration to Sri Lanka assumed a decisively familiar pattern. There were a number of factors which instigated the labourers such as the growth of the Nationalist Movement for Swaraj under Mahatma Gandhi. The Sri Lanka Constitution of 1920 and 1923, provided political rights to the Indian emigrants to Sri Lanka. On 1st July, 1929, the Sri Lankan Government affirmed that "Indians in Ceylon have the same legal rights as members of the local population and they can acquire and hold land <sup>[21]</sup>."

The status of Indians in Sri Lanka raised perplexing problems for the Government of India too and after independence the responsibility increased. While participating in a debate on foreign affairs in the Lok Sabha, Nehru said that he was feeling a great deal of difficulty in dealing with the matter of the people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka and was convinced that the issue could be solved only in a friendly and peaceful way <sup>[22]</sup>. The problem of Indian Tamils, the plantation workers of Indian origin in Sri Lanka, is not a recent issue in the relations between the two countries. It is a legacy of the colonial era. The citizenship status of the migrant workers remained till 1964, when the Sirimavo-Shastri pact was signed. India insisted that these workers should be accorded Sri Lankan citizenship, on the ground that as most of them had been in domicile in Sri Lanka. For generations they were not Indian citizens. In the process of negotiations, Shastri was neither patronizing nor overbearing. Mrs. Indira Gandhi continued Shastri tradition but in her own way. Her Sri Lanka policy continued to be guided by the need to find equitable solutions for bilateral problems.

### **Minority Problem**

The minority problem of Tamils of Indian origin in Sri Lanka is another irritant which has also an adverse bearing on the interaction between the two countries. The Sinhalese started feeling that the Tamilians of Indian origins were aliens; hence they should not be equated

with them. The prime cause of their conflict was the granting of political rights to the Tamils and the differences between them on the issue of language. Both the communities had claimed that they were the original settlers in Sri Lanka [23]. The social, religious, historical, economic and ideological differences between the two communities which are clearly visible and have been strengthened since independence are responsible for the feelings of bitterness which are prevailing between the two countries. Their relationship has been sometimes dependent on the political situations in the country not withstanding which party is ruling over Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka Tamil community created adverse feelings in the minds of Sinhalese people and it resulted in the exchange of hot words between the Governments of India and Sri Lanka [23].

The pattern of migration from India and the demographic dispersal of the migrants in Sri Lanka has been such that it has resulted in the strengthening of distinct identities of the communities on religio-racial-linguistic terms. Furthermore, the 1981 census reveals that though island-wise the Tamils are in a minority, in eight out of the twenty four districts, the Sinhalese have a minority status in numerical terms. Of these eight districts, the Sri Lankan Tamils have an absolute majority in five (Jaffna, Mannar, Vavuniya, Batticaloa, and Mallaithivu) and the largest numerical strength in one (Trincomalee) with the Moors and Indian Tamils (settled in Sri Lanka during the British period to work on plantations in the dominantly Sinhalese Central and Southern parts of the country) having similar position in one each, i.e., Amparai and Nuwara Eliya.

### **The Sri Lanka carnage**

**Ethnic Explosion:** Although India and Sri Lanka had taken creditable steps for resolving the problem of citizenship of the people of Indian origin in the island republic and although, the agreements arrived at between the two countries in this regard in the recent years were a laudable achievement the ethnic questions took a sombre and sinister turn as tensions arose between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. Economic factors have worked to aggravate the tensions. Serious violence erupted between the two communities in 1956 and again in 1958 and 1977. In 1977 the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) called for a separate homeland for the Tamils (Tamil Eelam) and on the extreme fringe came the "Tigers" with their violent, terrorist methods. Sinhalese-Chavanism was stirred up by Sinhalese leaders against the Tamilians. The worst flare-up and the carnage was witnessed in February 1983 when a reign of terror against the Tamilians engulfed the island.

The Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi's was desirous of finding a solution to the vexatious Tamil problem in Sri Lanka and sent special envoy G. Parthasarathy thrice to Colombo between August 1983 and January 1984 to help prepare the ground for round table talks. The TULF leaders, headed by Mr. Amrithalingam, came to India and had discussions with Mrs. Gandhi, with the government leaders and with the special envoy. Mrs. Gandhi conferred with President Jayawardane in November during the GHOGM summit. India exercised all its

powers of persuasion with the Tamil leaders to join political talks in Colombo without demanding assurances and guarantees. India also persuaded the Sri Lankan Government not to impose unacceptable preconditions. The Colombo approach to Tamil problem was to address it as essentially a problem of terrorism which was sought to be suppressed with counter terrorism. The carnage continued with fearful consequences for the future.

### **Bangladesh Crisis and Ceylon**

A ticklish problem for Sri Lanka, and an important one for India, was its response to the Bangladesh developments. The Colombo government tried to stay neutral and keep out of the problem and did considerable tight rope walking, but its real sympathy lay with Pakistan. Ceylon voted in favour of the United Nations resolution calling for the withdrawal of foreign forces from East Bengal. Sri Lanka as a small state on the borders of a big country like India, was susceptible to the usual fears of a big country at its doorsteps and their fears were strengthened by the turning of the scales as a result of the emergence of Bangladesh. It was not until March 1972 that Ceylon recognised Bangladesh, although Burma and Nepal had already done so [24].

### **The Kachchativu Problem**

To whom the Kachchativu island belonged was a subject of controversy between India and Sri Lanka. But the issue was settled once for all when Mrs. Bandaranaike and Mrs. Indira Gandhi signed an agreement in June 1974. The Island of Kachchativu, about 3/4 of the square mile in extent, is situated in the Palk Bay, it is about 10 miles from the nearest shore. The Palk Bay constitutes the waters of India and Sri Lanka. It has always been an uninhabited Island. Neither Sri Lanka nor India has had any permanent presence there. During the long colonial period the question whether Kachchativu belonged to India or part of Sri Lanka was frequently discussed and both claimed their sovereignty over the Island [25]. The issue was finally settled on June 1974 when both the countries signed comprehensive agreement demarcating the boundary between the two countries in the Palk-Bay. Under it the uninhabited Island of Kachchativu became part of the territory of Sri Lanka. This boundary falls one mile off the West coast of uninhabited Island of Kachchativu, with mutually satisfactory provisions have been made regarding navigation, pilgrimage, fishing and mineral exploration in the area [26]. The agreement was signed by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in New Delhi on 26<sup>th</sup> July, 1974 and by the Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mrs. Bandaranaike in Colombo on 28<sup>th</sup> June, 1974 [27]. The pact was described as a historical step towards consolidating the friendly ties between the two countries. It also gave a major blow to the mischievous propaganda in Pakistan that, in dealing with its smaller neighbours India is apt to behave like a bully [28].

In comparison with some of the other neighbouring States, India's relations with Sri Lanka was characterised by cordiality marked by negotiated settlements on bilateral irritants, e.g., the question of Kachchativu as well as the political status of the "Indian" Tamils in Sri Lanka. To some extent, the systematic congruence

provided a positive thrust to bilateral relations. Moreover, inhibitions and complexes emanating from too much dependence on the big neighbour, as in the case of Nepal, or psychological hangovers inherent and embedded in the very inception of countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, did not seem to cloud India-Sri Lanka relations. The Sinhalese and Tamil perceptions on India's role (on the Tamil issue) show a wide divergence. And even within their communities a change of perceptions can be discerned. The TULF, the middle class, the petty and big Tamil industrialists, many of whom in effect are for a negotiated settlement, believe that India's presence and mediation can facilitate concessions from Colombo on issues of autonomy and security.

On the other hand, the Tamil terrorists feel that positive help from India, either acceptable to them or sufficient support for their activities towards achieving Eelam, can also serve India's interest in containing "excessive" Western presence. The word support from India implies support from South India. While some groups envisage a separate and independent Eelam, there are others who do not rule out a political nexus of Tamil Nadu and Eelam. Still others believe that the continuous support of India to the APC and thereby a prop to the TULF will harm the human rights of Tamils, including the right of self-determination. The prerequisite of India's role should be to urge the Government of Sri Lanka to: (a) withdraw the armed forces in the Jaffna area; (b) repeal the Prevention of Detention Act; and (c) provide a package proposal acceptable to the Tamils. Tamils who are in exile or in asylum in South India should be ensured the right to move freely in Tamil areas in Sri Lanka. There is a shift in the Sri Lankan approach as much as its actions are directed at treating the Tamil question as a law-and-order problem.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi displayed statesmanship when arriving at the agreement on Kachchativu with Sri Lanka thus resolving the problem of maritime border in a spirit of magnanimity and mutual benefit. This is one of the two outstanding problems between the two countries, the other being the people of Indian origin settled in Sri Lanka. With this agreement signed in June 1974, the two countries demarcated their boundary from Palk Strait to Adam's Bridge. Mutually satisfactory progress was also made with regard to navigation, pilgrimage, fishing and mineral exploitation in the area. Earlier in January 1974, under the aegis of Indira Gandhi Government a further agreement had been reached regarding the repatriation of Indians in Sri Lanka.

### Colombo Conference, 1976

The Fifth Non-Aligned summit was held at Colombo from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> August, 1976. It was attended by 86 member states and 22 observer nations. The world was passing through a difficult phase because of the Arab-Israeli war and the rise in oil prices. An attempt was made during this conference to further institutionalize the non-aligned movement. The Colombo summit defined in great detail the structure and working of the bureau. Amongst the resolutions passed were those demanding the dismantling of U.S. bases in Diego Garcia. The Colombo declaration asked member states to desist from military

alliances. It also called for sanctions against Israel and South Africa.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi was of the opinion that unity and solidarity among the non-aligned countries were all the more necessary in the present crisis in international relations. The role of Mrs. Gandhi has been one of the distinctive contributions in the field of non-alignment. During the second period of her Prime-Ministership, she did not bring any change in the field of non-alignment. She very strongly desired that the continuing arms race between the super powers must be stopped and the world's natural resources should be equitably distributed. In its Annual report for 1977-78, presented to Parliament, the Ministry of External Affairs claimed that the basic continuity of India's foreign policy had been "reasserted in no uncertain terms", but added that the major political transformation followed. The 1977 elections had influenced the "content and style" of foreign policy [29]. It also maintained that the main thrust of the Government's foreign policy was governed by the assumption that India could play an effective and peaceful role in the world community "only if it has peaceful, friendly and productive relations with the neighbouring countries." Hence the policy strategy of "neighbourhood diplomacy" aimed at as generally creating a climate of confidence essential for greater concentration on the development priorities [30].

India's Sri Lanka policy should continue to be accommodative of the domestic political and economic pressures in Sri Lanka. At the same time a view of Sri Lanka's emphasis on the regional dimension of bilateral economic relations, India's Sri Lanka policy should be closely related to the regional context [31].

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