

# Asian Resonance

## Indo-Sri Lankan Relations : Issues and Concerns

### Abstract

The relation between India and Southern neighbour (Sri Lanka) were cordial in the first three decades of the Indian independence and based on mutual understanding. But with the emergence of LTTE in Sri Lanka and civil war in Sri Lanka, the relations between both countries started deteriorated. There are internal and external factors which influence the foreign policies of both countries. Recently Sri Lanka's relations with Pakistan and China are really a matter of concern for Indian policy makers. Any type of presence of any external power can create a serious threat to the security of India in South Asian region.

**Keywords:** Diplomatic, Kachativu, Post Civil War Period, Bi-Lateral, Human Rights, LTTE, Sinhala, Ethnic.

### Introduction

India has been a country with the greatest influence over Sri Lanka. India and Sri Lanka, both have a legacy of intellectual, religious, cultural and linguistic interaction. The relationship between both countries is more than 2500 years old. Like India, Sri Lanka is ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse country. Sinhala, Tamil (official) and English are the languages spoken in Sri Lanka. Majority of the people in Sri Lanka speak Sinhala (an Indo-European language) language and this is the first language of Sinhalese, Tamil, a Dravidian language is the language of Tamils and this is the first language of Moors. According to 2012 Census 98% of the Moors speak Tamil only and Tamil language is widely used in the northern and eastern part of the country and English is widely spoken and understood in the urban centres and this language is widely used for commerce and business.

### Objectives

The Objective of this paper is to analyse the Indo-Sri Lankan relations from independence to post civil war period of ethnic problem in Sri Lanka. The chronological method has been used to analyse the relations between two countries and the issues of War Crimes, Fishermen, Human Rights Violation by Sri Lankan troops (during the end of LTTE in Sri Lanka), Kachativu Island are the important issues for both the countries and to analyse the role of regional political parties of Tamil Nadu in Indo Sri Lankan Relations. In this paper all these issues are being examined.

### Religious composition of Sri Lanka is as given below as per 2012 Census Record

Buddhism	-	70.19%
Hinduism	-	12.61%
Islam	-	9.71%
Christianity	-	7.45%
Others	-	0.5%

### The Ethnic Composition of Sri Lanka as per 2011, Govt. Statistics are as Given Below

Sinhala	-	74.9%
Sri Lankan Tamils	-	11.1%
Moors	-	9.3%
Indian Tamils	-	4.1%
Others	-	0.6%

### Indo Sri Lankan Relations

India and Sri Lanka were under the British rule and India and Sri Lanka got independence in 1947 and 1948 respectively. Both countries share same governing system and followed the policy of NAM (Non alignment Movement) started by Pt. Nehru (India), Col. Nasir (Egypt) and Marshal Tito (Yugoslavia) and the people of Indian origin comprising Sindhis, Gujratis, Parsis, Telugu and Malayalis are also settled in Sri Lanka. After independence Indian community is engaged in different



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ventures. Their number is less but economically they are prosperous and are well placed. As per India (Census 2011) the population of Indian origin Tamils in Sri Lanka is about 1.6 million.

## Indo Sri Lankan Relations and LTTE Issue

"The bi-lateral relations of India and Sri Lanka deteriorated in 1980's with the rising of Tamil Militant separation in Sri Lanka. The policy of India in connection with Tamil separation was more controversial in relations of two countries. First Mrs. Indira Gandhi's govt. of New Delhi involved deeply in the Sri Lankan conflict by strengthening Tamil militant groups with arming and military training in India's territory. Second simultaneously the Indian govt. provided her good offices to find a political solution for the conflict."<sup>1</sup>

"The relations were further deteriorated when India sent her Airforce Fighter Aircrafts to the Sri Lanka's airspace to drop the food shipments by air to Jaffna Peninsula violating the International Law".<sup>2</sup>

An agreement was signed between Indian Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Mr. Jayewardene in 1987 and in this agreement, India immediately sent her Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka to disarm the Tamil militant groups in Jaffna according to the agreement. Not only IPKF failed to disarm the LTTE but also fell into a war with them and lost nearly 1500 IPKF soldiers. President Premadasa who came to power subsequently Sri Lanka's President Jayewardene demanded the immediate withdrawal of IPKF.<sup>3</sup>

In 1991 Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by the LTTE during the general election campaign of Tamil Nadu. That incident made the way for the Indian govt. to ban the LTTE as a terrorist organisation. However in late 1990's LTTE became the most powerful organisation in the country as well as in the world.<sup>4</sup>

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksha took a strong action against LTTE and Civil war was ended in 2009 and thousands of terrorists and civilians were killed during this Civil war and after the end of civil war Indian National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan and Indian Foreign Secretary Shiva Shankar Menon visited Sri Lanka and informed to the Sri Lankan Govt. about India's concern to apply a political solution to the national crisis in Sri Lanka as soon as possible. Further they persuaded for the root causes of Tamil Separation in Sri Lanka.

After the end of civil war in Sri Lanka President Rajapaksha visited India in June 2009. During this visit our Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh assured Rajapaksha that India will support to reconstruct the war affected areas and rehabilitate programmes.

In the beginning Indian Govt. provided emergency supply of medicines, temporary housing and cement and undertaken demining programmes in war zones with an involvement of US\$ 110 million.<sup>5</sup>

Later India further extended her cooperation to assist for the post war reconstruction process in Sri Lanka involving with several projects. For example in

2010 India has granted US\$ 27.5 Million for reconstruction projects in Northern province.<sup>6</sup>

In 2010 India has contributed 15% of foreign finance committed by major donors of Sri Lanka.<sup>7</sup>

## Role of Political Parties in Indo-Sri Lankan Relations

The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalita (AIADMK), other pro-LTTE political parties DMK, MDMK and key political players of Tamil Nadu accuse to the Sri Lankan govt. on war crimes during the final steps of military operations against the LTTE in 2009. Anti Sri Lankan protests were continuing throughout Tamil Nadu state in India which were organised by DMK, AIADMK and MDMK. Thousands of students and pro-LTTE political parties joined the protests and asking an international investigation against war crimes committed against the Tamils by the Security forces.<sup>8</sup>

The Sri Lankan President and his family personally visited Bodh Gaya in Bihar State in Feb, 2013 to pay homage to the famous Buddhist temple Mahabodhi. When he arrived to the temple there were hundreds of anti-Sri Lankan demonstrators shouting with slogans near the temple. In Tamil Nadu, DMK leader Karunanidhi led with black flags and protested in Chennai to Rajapaksha's visit.<sup>9</sup>

President Rajapaksha also visited India in May, 2014 to attend the swearing in ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and he also visited Tirupati in December, 2014.

Sirisena was elected as the new President of Sri Lanka in January, 2015 and on the same day Wickreme Singhe was also sworn in as the new Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. Prime Minister Narendra Modi also visited Sri Lanka in March, 2015.

## Cultural, Educational and Trade Relations

Both countries have good cultural ties. The Indian Culture Centre in Colombo promotes awareness of Indian culture regarding dance, music, hindi and yoga. On June 21st, 2015 Indian High Commission Office organised first International Yoga Day and this Yoga day was attended by nearly 2000 yoga enthusiasts. India and Sri Lanka commemorated the 2600 year of the attainment of enlightenment by Lord Budha through joint activities.

Education is the important area of cooperation. India now offers about 290 scholarships of different types annually to Sri Lankan students. Govt. of India formally launched the e-Tourist Visa (eTv) scheme for Sri Lankan tourists in April, 2015.

In the commercial field, India is among the top five investors in Sri Lanka. The investment is mainly in the field of petroleum, I.T., Real Estate and Metal industries etc. Indian companies like South City, Kolkata decided to invest (US\$400 million), ITC has also committed to invest US\$300 million and TATA Housing has also decided to invest in Sri Lanka for their projects. On the other side Sri Lankan companies like Brandix (about US\$ 1 billion) to set up a Garment City in Vishakhapatnam are good signals for good relations for both countries.

After the end of Civil war in Sri Lanka, a new humanitarian challenge emerged as nearly 3,00,000

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Tamil Civilians were internally displaced persons. Indian govt. advocated the need of the Tamil people to be resettled their original habitations as early as possible. Indian govt. immediately provided roofing sheets, 2,00,000 bags of cement for constructing temporary houses for displaced persons. In June, 2010 Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh announced the construction of 50,000 housing units, construction of cultural centre and setting up a 500 MW Coal Power Plant at Sampur. The first stage of the construction of 1000 houses in the northern province was completed in June 2012 and upto July, 2015, it was estimated that more than 30,500 houses will be constructed. With financial assistance from India the tsunami-damaged Colombo Metro rail link has been repaired.

## Fishermen Issue

The fishermen issue is also an important issue between Indian and Sri Lanka. The Palk-Straits and the Gulf of Mannar are the areas where incident of straying of fishermen are common between both countries. Both countries are in favour to deal this issue on humanitarian grounds. The dispute between South Indian fishermen and the Sri Lankan Navy over the fishing rights increased the tense relations between Sri Lanka and India further more. The narrow area of Palk Strait between Sri Lanka and India, which separate the two countries is the disputed area for a long time.<sup>10</sup>

The fishermen problem was at its peak in Feb, 2011 when AIADMK and MDMK had given highest priority to fishermen issue in their election campaign. During this period two fishermen were killed in the sea and Tamil Nadu govt. accused the Sri Lankan govt. for all this. President Rajapaksha met Indian Prime Minister during SAARC Summit held in Maldives in Nov, 2011 and both leaders were agreed to appoint a joint working group to assure for a long lasting solution for the fishermen issue related to both the countries. Arrest of Indian fishermen on the Sri Lankan side of the Maritime Boundary Line in the Palk Straits and the Gulf of Mannar by the Sri Lankan authorities has been a long standing problem.

## The Kachativu Issue

Kachativu is a small island of 1.5km<sup>2</sup> located in Pak Strait which is 15 miles away north east of Rameshwaram of Tamil Nadu (India) and 14 miles away South West of Delft Island in Sri Lanka. Tamil Nadu govt. raises the issue of Kachativu Island and this island was handed over to Sri Lanka by India in 1974 by 'Kachativu Island Pact'. Jayalalita Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu has often criticised the Indian govt. for giving away the Kachativu to Sri Lanka. the Tamil Nadu has also stressed that India should take over the island from Sri Lanka again. In 2008 Jayalalita filed a petition in the Supreme Court and sought its direction to the govt. of India to retrieving the island.<sup>11</sup>

In 2011 Tamil Nadu assembly unanimously passed a special resolution in connection with the Kachativu issue. M. Karunanidhi, Ex Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu also filed a petition in the Supreme Court

in connection with regaining control of Kachativu Island.

## Human Rights Issue

U.N. Human Rights Council adopted a resolution in 2012 and 2013 respectively and demanded to ensure the accountability for alleged war crimes and human rights violations during the final days of the war against LTTE. The United States sponsored resolution in the 47 members of UNHCR, 24 countries voted for the resolution and 15 against it in 2012, in its session in Geneva.<sup>12</sup>

## Tension Areas

During the end of civil war and in recent times Sri Lanka is developing relations with China and Pakistan. During the last days of Civil war and Sri Lankan troops fight against LTTE Pakistan govt. had provided help to Sri Lanka and China has been actively involved to construct the Hambantota International Airport. China also extends her diplomatic support and military aid to Sri Lanka understanding with the strategic locations of Sri Lanka in Indian Ocean. India as a South Asian regional power does not tolerate the growing relations of Sri Lanka with China and Pakistan. Sri Lankan President Rajapaksha visited Pakistan in Feb, 2012 and this visit confirmed the development of economic cooperation between two countries. Most of the policy makers in India fear that the involvement of China and Pakistan is not a good signal for India.

## Suggestions and Future Possibilities

New Sri Lankan President Sirisena's decision to visit India on his maiden overseas trip indicates the revival of strong ties between both countries and after change in leadership in India, Prime Minister Modi paid visit to Sri Lanka after a gap of 28 years and he came in power with full majority and he did not allow political parties of Tamil Nadu to dictate the Indian govt. in external affairs. He became the first Indian Prime Minister who visited Jaffna. Modi's 'Neighbourhood First' policy can play an important role in developing cordial relations with Sri Lanka in the near future.

Modi is of the opinion that "I am convinced that the future of any country is influenced by the state of its neighbourhood". In his statement he further asserted "We stand with you in your efforts to build a future that accommodates the aspirations of all societies including the Sri Lankan Tamil community for a life of equality, justice, peace and dignity in a united Sri Lanka."

Signing of Nuclear deal with India (Not with Pakistan or China) and signing of memorandum on establishment of Nalanda University is a major set back for China and Pakistan and a positive signal for India. These recent development shows that both countries can again play important role in South Asian region in near future. With such type of deals and agreements we can convince the Sri Lankan govt. to roll back the policies pursued by the former President Rajapaksha that made Sri Lanka a closer ally of China and with such types of deals and agreements India can counter Pakistan and Chinese strategic

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influence in Sri Lanka in its "Backyard" in the near future.

## Conclusion

This bi-lateral relations between India and Sri Lanka are based on domestic and international factors. The regional political parties in Tamil Nadu play an important role in the making of Indian foreign policy with Sri Lanka. There are some international issues which are also a matter of concern for India, like Pakistan's help to Sri Lanka and China's growing role in Sri Lankan affairs and developing infrastructure in Sri Lanka. These issues disturb the Indian policy makers. In spite of all this, Indian govt. is also doing its best efforts for developing good diplomatic relations. Strong diplomatic ties between India and Sri Lanka are not good only for both countries but also good for the entire SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation) region.

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