

India, Sri Lanka – The Tamil Question

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The island country of Sri Lanka is geographically part of the Indian sub-continent and though the Palk Strait does provide a narrow stretch of water physically separating Sri Lanka from India, not far below the surface is the land link provided by Ram Setu or Adams Bridge. I refer here to a geological phenomenon and not a mythical, religious or a metaphysical belief. Geographically, ethnically, linguistically, culturally and religiously Sri Lanka, despite being a separate nation, is very much a part of India. The objective of this paper is not to lead to a merger of Sri Lanka into India, but to emphasise that we enjoy a common heritage which virtually mandates that India and Sri Lanka should have the closest links with each other and that no third party should be permitted to divide us.

Sri Lanka as an island is large but in total area is only 65,610 square kilometers. That makes it the size of one of the smaller States of India. Its population is about two crores. The demographic composition is interesting. The majority consists of the Sinhala people, who claim their origin from Bengal and Orissa and whose language, Sinhalese, is highly sanskritised and certainly belongs to the Indo Aryan group of languages. There is a sizable Muslim minority, many of them of Maldivian, Arab and Indian origin. There is also a small group of Burghers who are roughly equivalent to our Anglo Indians. Then there are two major Tamil groups. The first, by far the largest, is of Tamils inhabiting the North and part of North Eastern Sri Lanka, who will hereinafter be referred to as Jaffna Tamils for the sake of convenience. They form the vast majority in the five districts of the Northern Province, that is, Jaffna, Mannar, Vavuniya, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu. The two districts of the North Central Province, Anuradhapura and Pollonnaruwa also have a substantial Tamil population and two of the three districts of the Eastern Province, Batticaloa and Trimcomalee, also have a number of Jaffna Tamils. These Tamils have been living in Sri Lanka virtually from the very beginning and have always been recognised as full and original citizens of Sri Lanka. There is a second group of Tamils who were brought in as indentured labour by the British when they introduced plantation crops, especially tea but also some rubber, mainly in the Central Province consisting of the districts of Kandy, Matale and Nuwara Eliya. They came on indentured contract and it was not originally the policy to settle them permanently in Sri Lanka. As time went on, however, they settled permanently in the plantation areas and are now very much a part of the Sri Lankan population. They were not accepted as such by either the Sinhalese or the Jaffna Tamils and there was several pacts between India and Sri Lanka about what to do with these Tamils. The Sri Lanka Government disenfranchised them and this led to a major outbreak of discontent amongst the plantation Tamils. Some were repatriated to India which undertook their rehabilitation on the mainland, but ultimately the majority were granted citizenship. These Tamils, however, are not part of the Eelam movement launched by the Jaffna Tamils.

Under British rule the Jaffna Tamils went in for education in a big way, in which English and Tamil were the two languages of instruction. A large number of senior posts in the Sri Lanka Army, Police and Civil Service and Judiciary were occupied by Tamils because they were the best educated citizens of Sri Lanka. The situation was not very different from what existed in India in that people from the South, especially Tamil Brahmins and Malayalees, dominated the

Civil Service in the Centre. When Hindi was introduced as the State language there was an outcry in Tamil Nadu because it was felt that this would put Tamils at a disadvantage for public service in India, resulting in the overall development of the South slowing down and easing out South Indians from the instrumentalities of power. In India we took the anti Hindi movement in Tamil Nadu very seriously and, therefore, by adopting the three language formula and retaining English as the link language we have, by and large, been able to prevent a serious secessionist movement in the South. Today even the most extreme Tamil parties in India no longer talk about a separate Tamil homeland. The way in which we have tackled the situation is exemplified by the State emblem of India in which the motto is “Satyameva Jayate”, which means that “Truth Ever Triumphs”. In Tamil Nadu, at the height of the anti Hindi movement, the State Government changed the Tamil emblem motto to ‘Vayi Meyi Vellum’, which also means Satyameva Jayate. Instead of reacting strongly to this the Central Government preferred to ignore it and now the State emblem and its motto are no longer an issue. The Malayalees, being practical people, knowing that they are the best educated in India, chose to ignore the language issue and could gain new proficiency in the languages of different States and continue to form an extremely important part of the government structure in every State of India. In Madhya Pradesh the Secretariat would collapse if the Malayalee officials withdrew and certainly the health services would receive a fatal blow if nurses from Kerala were to go away.

Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country whose Constitution in Article 9 states, “The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be its duty to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1) (e)”. This gives the right of religious freedom to every citizen of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is not quite a theocracy and it is not quite a secular State in the same way as India is, but it does allow the religious freedom of a secular State. However, because of Article 9 the Buddhist Mahasangha is very powerful and its pronouncements and diktats have a profound influence on how the Sri Lankan Government acts and behaves. This is a fact which must be borne in mind when we do any thinking on Sri Lanka, its problems, and our policy towards it. In 1956 Sri Lanka very foolishly adopted the policy of Sinhala as the only State language, with this being given full effect to in 1961. That knocked Tamil off its equal perch with Sinhala and English and in fact removed it from the list of State languages. This automatically led to the fear that not only would Tamils no longer be qualified for government service but also that those who were Tamils in high position would be eased out of their jobs. There was very powerful Tamil reaction and this is one of the main causes for the demand for a separate Tamil homeland, preferably an independent country created by partitioning Sri Lanka. Simultaneously there were extremely violent anti Tamil riots in 1958 and 1977, culminating in the worst riot of all 1983, in which there was virtual ethnic cleansing of Tamils from Colombo and the Western Province.

The two main Tamil parties were Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) which is a party dating back to 1949 through its predecessor, the so-called Federal Party, followed in 1978 by the creation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Thereafter the entire separatist movement was taken over by LTTE, whose undisputed leader was Velupillai Prabhakaran. Incidentally, LTTE cadres had been initially trained in India and a large part of LTTE’s initial armaments came from transfer of weapons seized by us from the Pakistan armed forces in the 1971 Bangladesh War. There is, therefore, some justification for the Sri Lankan allegation that LTTE was supported by us, even though its creation was of local Sri Lankan origin. I state this because though this is not a paper on the Sri Lankan civil war and our role in it, we were very much a part of it at the start and that makes us as guilty as the Tamil and Sinhala protagonists. I

have not been able to understand the psychology of our government in the manner in which it evolved its Sri Lankan policy. We were annoyed with the Sri Lanka Government for the manner in which it was treating the Kandy Tamils, but did that justify our arming a group which ultimately became the most powerful guerilla force in the world and which brought us into open conflict with it when Rajiv Gandhi became Prime Minister?

For India the complications began with the question of the Kandy Tamils, which we were ultimately able to sort out through a series of agreements with the Sri Lanka Government. However, the situation in Northern Sri Lanka was very different because here it was not the question of status of Tamils who were originally Indian but rather the relationship between two indigenous groups in Sri Lanka, both of Indian origin but now rooted firmly in Sri Lanka. As the Buddhist Sinhala attitudes hardened and as the Jaffna Tamils reacted, one could see Sri Lanka sliding first into a cycle of ethnic violence and thereafter into a fratricidal civil war. Did the fear of what happened in Sri Lanka and its effect on Tamil Nadu drive us to a policy which has left us with more problems than it has solved? Did we misread the Tamil movement in Tamil Nadu, led by Annadorai and his successors, as an incipient civil war which could lead to the break up of India? We have a great deal of experience of fighting insurgency in the North East and there our handling was quite deft. We have been successful in putting down militancy in the Punjab and separatist movements in Jammu & Kashmir. Even today we are tackling Naxalism in what I would describe a weak manner but which could also be viewed as a measured response of the State to a situation which is internal and must be handled by the civil government. Hyderabad and Junagadh did not dismember India. Even as late as 1983 did we really think that Tamil Nadu would break away on the language issue? In 1978 when the Emergency was declared Tamil Nadu fell in line in the same manner as every other State. Why did the Indian State has such a lack of confidence in itself to tackle any movement in Tamil Nadu without resorting to uncalled for adventurism in Sri Lanka because the Tamils there had a dispute with the Sinhalese people?

Anyway, as the situation in Sri Lanka degenerated into a civil war Sri Lanka was left to handle two different situations which threatened the very existence of that country. The first was the increasing strength of the separatist movement in the North. The second was the extremely violent, extreme left wing movement of the Janatha Vimukti Peruman (JVP) whose obvious objective was to dismantle the Sri Lankan regime and to establish an extreme left wing State. Comparisons with the nihilistic regime of Pol Pot in Cambodia come to mind. A stage came when the Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the President of Sri Lanka, called for our assistance to protect that country from JVP and our first intervention took place by sending units of the Central Reserve Police Force to guard Colombo. This was welcomed by the Sri Lankans. Meanwhile the situation in the North and North East kept deteriorating and the Sri Lankan Army and Police also retaliated with force. The whole of Jaffna Peninsula, the districts of Mannar, Kilinochchi, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu, together with Jaffna passed out of the control of the Sri Lankan Government, Anunadhapura and Pollonnaruwa were centres of major LTTE activity, Batticaloa and Trincomalee were affected and even a district as far south as Ampara was not free of LTTE terror. In Colombo there were a large number of bombings and shooting incidents in which the LTTE played a major role.

Into this cauldron stepped our young Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi and his gung-ho Chief of Army Staff, General K. Sunderji. Prabhakaran was called to Delhi and was made to sign some sort of a pact which could bring about an end to civil war. On return to Jaffna he said that

he was virtually held a prisoner in Delhi and pressurised to sign the agreement and that he repudiated it in totality. Meanwhile Rajiv Gandhi and J.R. Jayawardane, the President of Sri Lanka, signed a pact which opened the doors for intervention by India in Sri Lanka. We first went in with humanitarian aid in Jaffna. Then Indian troops were inducted and soon we were engaged in a full-fledged war with LTTE. We suffered horrendous casualties, including more than 1450 dead and between four thousand and five thousand injured and maimed. Lt. Gen. Kobakaduwa, who was the Northern Army Commander in Sri Lanka, told me that he had advised the Indian Army that the LTTE did not consist of uneducated guerilla fighters but consisted of highly educated young persons, many of them science and engineering graduates, who had mastered the art of ambush, use of remotely detonated explosive devices and were experts in defence in depth. He had suggested that the Indian Army take Sri Lankan officers who were experienced in fighting LTTE on board for liaison purposes, but this offer was rejected. What resulted was that IPKF was in the vanguard of fighting LTTE and the Sri Lankan Army and Police were released to launch a massive onslaught on JVP and destroy it. The Indian Army, being the professional force that it is, took heavy casualties but succeeded in suppressing LTTE and driving it into a few isolated forest strongholds, where it was bottled up. Given a free hand the Indian Army and Air Force could have completely destroyed LTTE, but as is often the case in India, this free hand was not given. However, the LTTE occupied districts were restored to near normalcy and Sri Lankan civil government became functional.

Meanwhile the government changed in India and in Sri Lanka. V.P. Singh became our Prime Minister and R.Premadasa became President of Sri Lanka. Premadasa was a very wily politician, expert in intrigue and with his own hidden agenda of politics. He and Prabhakaran had a secret pact whereby he asked for withdrawal of IPKF, a demand to which V.P. Singh acceded. Without fully completing its task IPKF left Sri Lanka, thus enabling LTTE to claim a great victory. As soon as the last Indian soldier left Prabhakaran reneged on his agreement with Premadasa and in sixteen police stations of the North and more than four hundred and fifty Sri Lankan policemen were murdered. LTTE revived, the civil war dragged on and thousands of Sri Lankans were killed. The entire Jaffna Peninsula, once a very prosperous agricultural area and a centre of education, was virtually destroyed.

Neither Premadasa, who was himself assassinated, nor Chandrika Kumaratunga, who became Prime Minister and then President, were able to re-establish control over the Tamil areas, though the army continued to fight. Ultimately Mahinda Rajapaksa became President and he was cut from a different cloth. He resolutely rebuilt the Sri Lankan Army and posted as its commanders officers of a strong will and truly professional training and attitude. The Army was given all the equipment it needed, China being its main source because India would not give Sri Lanka heavy weapons and a resurgent Sri Lankan Army went about its task professionally, first clearing the North East and then driving the LTTE out of all its strongholds in the North. Ultimately LTTE was driven into a corner where it was virtually pounded into extinction. The last stages of the civil war were savage and perhaps some elements of the Sri Lankan Army did commit excesses which a section of the Western media has projected as atrocities amounting to war crimes. In all this India was increasingly marginalised, unable to save the Tamils, unwilling to help the Sinhalese, a witness to the end of a civil war but no longer a powerful entity which could help in rebuilding Sri Lanka. All this happened because throughout this unpleasant episode of history India either adopted wrong policies or played the part of a helpless onlooker. In the process we have alienated the Sinhala and the Tamil alike. We should have rejoiced at the destruction of the most violent guerilla movement in the world, LTTE, an organisation second to

none in committing atrocities against its enemies. This organisation was the origin of the suicide bomber, one of whom assassinated Rajiv Gandhi. This is the organisation which taught the Indian Army a lesson in irregular warfare which it can never forget. This is the organisation which has rekindled a highly disruptive movement in Tamil Nadu which, though it does not raise fears of separatism, is still powerful enough to influence the policy of India towards Sri Lanka, a policy that has caused us to self-destruct in that country.

I had been international observer of the elections in Sri Lanka on four occasions, ranging from local government to provincial, national and presidential elections. I have toured twenty-two out of the twenty-five districts of that country. After the parliamentary elections when I returned to Delhi my batchmate, P. Murari, who was Secretary to the President, R. Venkatraman, called me to brief the President on what I had observed in Sri Lanka and what I could suggest about our policy towards that country. Fortunately I had been briefed fully by N.N. Jha, my batch mate and High Commissioner in Sri Lanka and I was able to communicate some of the ideas which had originated from Jha. I told the President that China was already establishing a foothold in Sri Lanka and had built a magnificent conference complex and research facility in Colombo called the Bandaranaike Centre, where international conferences were held. I told the President that we must counter Chinese influence and participate in the development of Sri Lanka so that our economic ties become closer. Carrying forward N.N. Jha's excellent ideas I said that:

1. We should gift to Sri Lanka one institute of IIT level and one of IIM level so that the quality of education in that country took a leap upward.
2. We should open the doors of our technical, management, medical, scientific, humanities and liberal arts institutes and universities to Sri Lankans so that huge numbers of students from that country could be educated in India and we could thus virtually create a pro India class in Sri Lanka.
3. Fishing is big business and the major means of livelihood of coastal people in that island country. Hitherto it is the Norwegians who had helped the Sri Lankan fishing industry. My suggestion was that we should make available about five hundred motorised inshore and offshore fishing vessels to Sri Lanka so that coastal communities could benefit. We could also help in setting up fishing harbours and processing industries.
4. Our jewellery industry should be given free access to Sri Lanka gems, on which there should be no import duty. Whole districts which provide gems, such as Ratnapura in Sri Lanka, would benefit if the market was enlarged.
5. We should freely allow duty free import of Sri Lankan tea, with our best quality tea being exported to the West. This would benefit both the Indian tea industry and Sri Lankan tea industry, which is a major employer of labour in that country.
6. We should invest heavily in infrastructure, especially roads, railways, power, housing and social infrastructure such as schools and hospitals, thus helping that war ravaged country to recover, rehabilitate displaced persons and restore prosperity to devastated area.

Unfortunately none of the items initiated by Jha and suggested by me have been implemented by government. The Sri Lankan Government offered us Hambantota Port for development in the South, but we stupidly did nothing about it. That port is now being developed by the Chinese, whose footprint in Sri Lanka is now not only visible but strong.

Based on television visuals and research by people who obviously have a strong pro Tamil stance, the West, led by the United State of America, has been leading a campaign for condemning Sri Lanka for atrocities against the Tamils. The Sri Lankans have been living for a quarter of century with a situation in which thousands of Sri Lankans have been killed and the country virtually torn apart. The Indian Army has experienced the ferocity of LTTE fighters who fought to the last bullet and rather than surrender committed suicide by chewing on a cyanide capsule. Such people cannot be winkled out through police or military action because they are prepared to die rather than surrender. They can only be killed to the last man and this is the situation which the Sri Lankan Army faced. Obviously in a situation such as this civilian casualties could take place. The carpet bombing of Japanese and German cities which more or less exclusively killed civilians during the Second World War did not invite charges of genocide or war crime against the allies because they were the victors. Why should the Sri Lankan Government now be accused of these crimes for what happened during a war in which the taking of prisoners was a remote possibility? The United States Government moved a resolution in the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) which virtually accused Sri Lanka of atrocities and worse and called for a plausible and credible investigation, obviously under international supervision. China and Pakistan voted against this resolution but India, under pressure from Tamil politicians and with the government facing a possibility of downfall if DMK withdrew support, voted for the resolution. In Sri Lankan eyes would not Pakistan and China be considered better friends than India? Does government have to be driven in foreign policy by Mamta Banerjee in the case of Bangladesh and M. Karunanidhi in the case of Sri Lanka? What about the self-interest of India? Has it ever occurred to our government that tomorrow if UNHRC adopts a resolution calling for a credible and plausible probe into alleged killing of innocent Sikhs by the Punjab Police, or human rights violation in Jammu & Kashmir by central forces, how would India react? No wonder India is no longer the flavour of the month in Colombo.

What are our options? First and foremost we should enter into a meaningful dialogue with the Sri Lankan Government for rehabilitation of Tamils and rebuilding of the northern districts. For this we should make available aid on an even more liberal scale than is being done in Afghanistan. The suggestions given by me to President Venkatraman are still valid and we should implement them. We should make it clear to the Sri Lankans that we believe that in the terms of the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution, within the overall ambit of the constitutional provision that Sri Lanka is a unitary state, the devolution of powers to the provinces must be done meaningfully, speedily and in the right spirit. If devolution is done then there would be a good case to argue that Jaffna Tamils do not have any grounds of grievance because both in intent and deed the Sri Lankan Government is keen to empower them to the maximum degree possible.

We have already lost Nepal to the Maoists and the Chinese despite the fact that Hindu and Buddhists in Nepal are so intrinsically a part of India that the two countries should actually breathe as one. This is because we have no policy towards Nepal. We are repeating the same mistake in Sri Lanka. The United States still has the Monroe Doctrine whereby there is a cordon sanitaire into which no third country can step. We do not have the advantage of a vast sea surround which protects continental America from the rest of the world. However, there are certain things on which we cannot compromise and that includes keeping Sri Lanka within the

Indian zone of influence. As I have already stated there have been two armed interventions by India in Sri Lanka and to protect our interests there this is an option which must be available to us and of which the Sri Lankan Government must be aware. Economic and foreign policy ties between India and Sri Lanka must be very strong, but India must lay down the bottom line which can be transgressed by Sri Lanka only at peril. Will we ever have a government strong enough to do this? It is India's interests which must govern our foreign policy and certainly the compulsions of Tamil politics cannot drive our policy towards Sri Lanka.
