



India and Sri Lanka Relations: During PM Rajiv Gandhi and Narendra Modi Regime

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Abstract

This paper represented an assessment of India's role in the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis of 1987-90s. It was critical situation in the region particular, from the security aspect. For India, there are historical relations of India with Sri Lanka. When Sri Lanka failed in the internal crisis, came a dangerous problem in front of New Delhi. Therefore, India directly involved in the landscape and did not remain isolate from the island because of their geographical continuity and ethnic affinity towards India. On the other hand, the concern of European countries and the policies adopted by Pakistan and China towards the ethnic conflict made India more active to show her intervention. India's main motive was to find a political prospect and peace with the exchange view of Sri Lankan government which provides safety and security to the Indian ethnic groups in the country. Therefore, India supported the Tamil people and showed her sympathy towards them, but at the same time, they did not want the Tamil militant groups to do any illegal activity. The main focus of this paper is to highlight the main issues and causes of Sri Lankan ethnic conflict and role of India to settle these issues. Second point is that attempted to explore the changing bilateral relations since one decade particular, Prime Minister Narendra Modi regime.

Keywords: Pawan operation, Indian Military, NDA, LTTE, IPKF, Tamil

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka earlier known as Ceylon is an Island Republic situated in the side of Indian Ocean, or South Asia. The geography area is 25,332 square miles and has home to a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic population approximately, 2.14 crores (2017). Sinhala Buddhists as majority that comprises 74 percent of the population, Tamils about 13 percent, Muslims 7 percent and rest constitutes various smaller ethnic groups.

In Pre-independence period, Sri Lanka was considered as the best country among the third world countries as well as in South Asian region. It was looked upon as one of the best example for its social and economic policies till 1970s. Sri Lanka was regarded as a social welfare state for its best social and economic policies^[1]. All this suddenly came to an end when ethnic conflict broke out between the two Sri Lankan communities Sinhalese and Tamils.

Sinhalese are in majority in the Sri Lanka and profess Buddhism. Tamils are also in vast numbers but are in minority group. As a matter of fact, they came from Tamil Nadu of India and settled down in North-Eastern part of Sri Lanka. The Tamils are mostly Hindus although there are many Muslims among them. After independence of Sri Lanka, the United National Party (UNP) formed in 1946 as major party in the country. Its policies were liberal and secular. A new party Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLEP) was formed in the year 1951 under Solomon Bandaranaike's leadership. From that period, Sri Lankan politics took a new turning point. The party propagated that Sri Lanka belonged to Sinhalese only. The Tamils felt that they are in hopeless minority. The Sinhalese started side-lining Tamils through their active and systematic politics^[2]. The Tamils suffered from many privations. Their arrival in Sri Lanka was banned. They were required to have their living licenses. They could not obtain Sri Lankan citizenship, although many of them had been living in Sri Lanka for many years^[4]. The Sinhalese

people were declared the only national or official language of Sri Lanka. A large number of buses were owned by the Tamils. In order to deprive the Tamils of their property rights, the bus service along with the Colombo port, were nationalized. Under the system of the new land reform laws, the Tamils were deprived of their lands. As a consequence, discontent among Tamils gradually began to grow.

The Sinhalese discriminate the Tamils in every field and were denied from the rights which were enjoyed by the Sinhalese. From 1970 onwards Sri Lankan government become ruthless and started harassment and oppression against Tamils. In order to get rid of such discrimination and harassment, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was founded under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran in May 1976^[5]. It waged a violent secessionist and nationalist campaign to create an independent state in which the Tamils could enjoy liberty and equality. This campaign evolved into the Sri Lankan Civil War, which ran from 1983 until 2009, when the LTTE was defeated by the Sri Lankan military.

Following the sweeping electoral victory of the United National Party (UNP) in July 1977, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) become the leading opposition part by winning around one sixth of the total electoral votes, this party become platform for separate Tamil state. With the facing problems like 1977 riots in particular, J. R. Jayewardene government made some efforts to ease down the tensions. One of the important efforts was to liberalize the university admission to driven away Tamil youths from military. However, this concession was regarded by Tamil people and Tamil militants continued violent attacks on Sinhalese politician and government officials. During this period, the TULF and the militants drifted from each other on account of ideological differences. Consequently, TULF lost over the militant groups. Militant groups especially LTTE asked the civilians to boycott the local government elections of 1983 in which even TULF contested^[6]. Due to

sympathetic attitude of the Tamil people, voter turnout becomes negligible. Therefore, Tamil political parties had very little room to represent people's interest as insurgents rose above their position. The Tamils demanded for the establishment of an independent state for themselves- 'The Tamil Eelam' they were not ready to accept the Sinhalese domination in their political and social life demanded for a separate state. But the demand was not accepted by the Sri Lankan government and they strongly resisted their demand [7]. The Tamils were also demanding provincial autonomy within Sri Lankan federation. But Sinhalese were not ready to grant them provincial autonomy. The demand of a separate state by the Tamils was not tolerable for the Sinhalese. This was a strong difference between the two communities which led to the outbreak of communal riots in Sri Lanka.

With the joining of LTTE (1976) in this scene the late 1980, the civil war in Sri Lanka rose to its peak. The LTTE was the most strong and powerful militant group in Sri Lanka's land who used many illegal unlawful activities to acquire weapons and to highlight its demand of independence at the world map. The main conflict between the Sri Lanka government and LTTE, started in the year 1983. When many Tamils were killed by the Sinhalese. As the conflict breaks out in 1983 [8], the communal holocaust in the country and alienated the Tamil community. The relation between the two communities becomes more strained and bitter with the brutal killing of an estimated 2,000 Tamils by the Sri Lankan army. During the riots of 1983, Sinhalese used to keep Tamils and making fun of them [9]. They were treated very badly. All this led to the field of Tamils to neighbouring of India.

2. Factors Responsible for Involvement of India in Ethnic Conflict

The Tamil problem in Sri Lanka constitutes a key factor in the contemporary phase of Indo-Sri Lanka relations. The Tamils problem is actually an internal problem of Sri Lanka but it has been a source of strains on Indo- Sri Lanka relations because of socio-political and geographic conditions that constitutes the environment of the relations between these two countries [10]. The government of India wanted to improve the policy of keeping peace and stability from the Tamil problem because India considers it a domestic affair of Sri Lanka.

However, the Tamil problem fall out on India, particularly upon the Indian province of Tamil Nadu and the situation compelled India to interfere in the Sri Lankan internal affair. The leaders of India kept on expressing their concern at the harassment, oppression, discrimination and the policy of ill treatment method out to the Tamils of Sri Lanka. Some of the Indian leaders expressed sympathies for the Sri Lankan Tamils because of their strong cultural and historical links with the Sri Lanka Tamils. They continuously appeal to the Indian government to discuss the Tamil problem with the government of Sri Lanka to resolve the ethnic problem. But the demand did not accept by the government of India [11]. Certain sections of Indian press were quite vocal in expressing the view that Sinhalese must take those steps which will benefit the Tamil people and will satisfy the aspirations of Tamil community. This was also opposed by the Sri Lankan government and regarded it as an intervention in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka. The Sinhala leaders also voiced strong dislike for any sympathy expressed for the Tamils [12]. As Indian had directly and openly declared that it regards Tamil problem as an internal problem of Sri Lanka,

but several Sri Lankan leaders continuously suspected that Indian people support the Tamils and the Tamil problem was backed by the Indian people, particularly by the South Indians. Some efforts were made by the government of Jayewardene and announced some important steps for resolving the Tamil problem which however, failed to get materialized in practice. The ensuing months saw a fast deterioration in the internal conditions of Sri Lanka.

The Tamil problem of Sri Lanka becomes very complex and dangerous in 1980s. In the last week of July 1983, widespread Anti-Tamil riots broke out in Sri Lanka, with its epicentre in Colombo [13]. The Sri Lankan governments failed to provide safety and security to Tamil and their failure to protect the life of the Tamils, made the Tamil militant groups very active and they realized that the terrorist methods are the only methods for securing their rights which included the right of self-determination and statehood in Jaffna area.

The ethnic issue spread outside the Sri Lanka boundary. It made a threat to the regional security and ideological sensitivity of India. Initially, Sri Lankan government took the political and military aid from external factors such as USA, UK, China, Pakistan etc. Sri Lankan government did not probe India for any such assistance because of India's sympathy towards the Tamils [14]. India strongly criticized Sri Lanka seeking external military support. Then Prime Minister of India Mrs. Indira Gandhi in her conversation with President Jayewardene strongly disapproved Sri Lanka's such actions. Despite all this criticism, President Jayewardene went to Beijing and extracted promises of military and moral support from the country. The President of Sri Lanka also visited several tours to USA, UK, and India. During these visit, he got little help from UK and USA. In India he expresses his views on the Tamil problem and asked India not to interfere in the internal affair of Sri Lanka. Like UK, USA and China, Pakistan also came forward to hold Sri Lanka during the ethnic crisis [15]. The Sri Lanka received much aid and military equipment from Pakistan leaders and other officials of both the countries visited each other. This involvement becomes a threat to India's security. It was one of the reasons that India got involved in Sri Lankan issue. Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. He made a positive impression on the Sri Lankan politicians and diplomats who met during the early months of his office.

3. Indian Peace Keeping Force Withdrawal from Sri Lanka

The Indian army and the LTTE engaged in fierce fighting throughout October and November 1989. When the IPKF gained full control over Jaffna, the LTTE stronghold, the battle scene shifted to the east. As of January 1988, there was no convincing evidence to suggest that the LTTE was ready to meet the two conditions put forth by India: unconditional surrender of arms and unequivocal acceptance of the Indo-Sri Lankan Agreement [16]. As long as the LTTE refuses to fulfil these two basic conditions, prospects for implementing the agreement remain quite poor. Given the changing political situation elsewhere in Sri Lanka, the agreement may even lose its relevance.

The IPKF became highly unpopular with its alleged record of human rights violation in Sri Lanka and this led to the rise of Sri Lanka nationalist sentiment. Many Sinhalese opposed the continued IPKF presence in Sri Lanka. These nationalist sentiments compelled the Sri Lanka government to ask India

to quit the island ^[17]. They allegedly entered into a secret deal with LTTE that culminated in a ceasefire. The LTTE and IPKF continued fighting and according to some reports, the Sri Lankan government even armed the LTTE in order to see the retreat of the Indian forces. Despite, the casualties among the IPKF on rise and calls for the withdrawal of the IPKF from both sides, Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, refused to remove the IPKF from Sri Lanka. The new government of Prime Minister withdrew the IPKF on 24 March, 1990.

4. India's Role in Ethnic Conflict

President of Sri Lanka, Mr. Jayewardene and Prime Minister of India, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi held a summit in New Delhi for two days- on 2-3 June, 1985 and more stress was given on the Sri Lankan Tamil problem in the meeting ^[18]. After the meeting, both the leaders in the press statement expressed that they would create a proper atmosphere, positive talking and take immediate steps to diffuse the tension in Sri Lanka for the future progress and create 'Unity and Integrity' in Sri Lanka. Both the leaders agreed to restored peace and order in the country and to cease all forms of violence ^[19]. The summit meeting paved the way for a fresh and blood initiative for resolving the ethnic problem the coming year.

After the summit, two sets of talks were held between the delegations of Sri Lankan officials and various Tamil groups in Bhutan. The first phase of Thimpu talks between them was held in July 1985 and lasted for a week. This meeting was of an exploratory nature and both sides restated their view point. These talks were more fruitful. It was agreed that the second round of talks would be held in August 1985 ^[20]. In the second round of Thimpu talks between Sri Lanka government representatives and the Tamil group delegation, both sides attempted hard to ease down the differences in their quest for a solution to the ethnic problem. Due to the rigid attitude to Tamil militants these talks failed to give any result. After the failure of Thimpu talks on August 31, 1985, the government of Sri Lanka kept proposals ^[21]. Through these proposals, the government became ready that in each province, a provincial council would be established and expressed her willingness in India's negotiations with the Tamils. Sri Lanka government in their proposals gave some adequate powers to each provincial council to full fill the Tamil demand for autonomy within Sri Lanka.

In 1987, the Sri Lanka government attempted to regain control of the northern Jaffna region by means of an economic blockade and military assaults. It is not only caused anger amongst Tamils but also a flood of refugees entered into India which compelled India to intervene directly in the conflict for the first time. India supplied food and medicine to the Indian ethnic in Sri Lanka by air and sea. With the direct intervention of India, Negotiations were held and the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord was signed on July 29, 1987 by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Jayewardene to ease down the tensions between the two communities ^[22]. Under this accord, the Sri Lankan Government made a number of concessions to Tamil demands like devolution of power to the provinces, a union subject to later referendum of the Northern and the Eastern provinces into the single province and official status for the Tamil language (as the 13th amendment to the constitution of Sri Lanka) ^[23]. India was agreed to established order in the North and East through the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). It was also agreed that henceforth it would cease

assisting Tamil insurgents. Militant groups including the LTTE, agreed to surrender their arms to the IPKF, which initially oversaw a cease fire and a modest disarmament of the militant groups.

However, most of the Tamil militant groups laid down their weapons and agreed to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict, but the LTTE refused to disarm its fighters. Keen to ensure the implementation and success of the accord, the IPKF then tried to disarm the LTTE by force and ended up in full scale conflict with them. The three year of long conflict was also marked by the IPKF being accused of committing various abuses of human rights by many human rights groups as well as some within the Indian media. The IPKF also soon met stiff opposition from the Tamils. Operation Pawn was undertaken by the IPKF to take control of Jaffna from the LTTE in the late 1987 to enforce the disarmament of the LTTE as a part of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord ^[24]. This led to a brutal fighting between the IPKF and the LTTE for three weeks. After this brief fighting with the LTTE, IPKF took control of the Jaffna Peninsula from the LTTE rule. But this victory came after paying a very heavy price, as the IPKF lost around 214 soldiers.

5. PM Narendra Modi Government since 2014: New Vision with Sri-Lanka

Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi visited to Sri Lanka in May 2015 which was significant tour as the symbolism as well as political engagement. He remarks, "part of my objective of maintaining frequent contact with our neighbouring countries". This visit made to reshape the foreign policy between both countries because of this coincidental term came after 28 years, then Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi had visited to Colombo in the year 1987. And also, PM Modi visited the ancient capital and historic Buddhist religious place of Anuradhapura, Jaffna and Talaimannar, apart from addressing the Sri Lankan parliament.

During this visit, has done four agreement between India and Sri Lanka which has the most important for improving the bilateral cooperation. There are agreement including visa, customs, youth development and building Rabindranath Tagore memorial. There are multi-sectorial engagement in the field of economic, political as well as strategic proclamations. Though, the positive visit is likely to significantly to increase the atmosphere, into the process of engagement and assist as the moving a new chapter in the foreign policy with deepening the bilateral cooperation as well as people to people contact.

Modi's visit is important in term of political and cultural perspectives a new directions for reconsideration the historical relations between both sides. It well known that the cultural linkages between India and Sri Lanka. During his visit to Jaffna, Prime Minister inaugurated the Jaffna Cultural Centre funded by government of India. On the other hand, New Delhi's larger maritime strategy in the field of Indian Ocean. Both countries have already instituted an annual bilateral defence discourse and has the positive cooperation in defence as well as security perspective. All areas including political, economic, diplomatic as well as military, New Delhi is in a position to meet the SALF's potential combat aircraft requirements. It has the potential to drive in New Delhi's favour if the Indian political, bureaucratic and military-industrial leadership has the will and desire to see a sale of Indian combat aircraft to Sri Lanka become a reality

[25]. However, India and Sri Lanka must take care to strengthen their trade and commercial and diplomatic cooperation for charming into account the inclusive security measurement and their geographic, cultural and people to people contact. PM Modi's visit has all the components to represent a new chapter in the foreign policy between India and Sri Lanka relations [26].

6. Conclusion

India and Sri Lanka should also work together regarding a protocol to be observed by their patrolling naval forces, to the effect. Sri Lanka's acceptance of India's 'good offices,'. The Gandhi Doctrine and New Delhi's ability to courage organized militant activity conducted from its soil for strengthen the strategic engagement as a small neighbour country in the geography but is great importance soil to New Delhi in the coming year. Sri Lanka of India's sincerity as an honest negotiator has own significant on the world map because of the location of Sri Lanka is unique and covering from Indian Ocean. From this perspective, India must improve the bilateral relations with Sri Lanka in the field trade and investment, education and so on. The government led by Rajiv Gandhi as crisis with Sri Lanka but time has changed and no doubt, can build up a sincere effort to gain the Sri Lankan government's trust by restraining militant and trade activity with India. This overall view, of course, is part of the new leadership and new vision as an inclusive effort to promote greater understanding between both sides. They should attempt to attain the dialogue in the field of science and technology, skill development, investment, education and so on.

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