CHAPTER SIX

INDIA’S SRI LANKA POLICY: RAJIV GANDHI ASSASSINATION AND BEYOND

With the exit of Varadaraja Perumal and the virtual dissolution of the EPRLF-led provincial council in the North-East, the Sri Lankan situation was more or less back to the pre-Accord status. The IPKF pull-out created a power vacuum in the North-East that was quickly filled by the LTTE, who had not renounced their goal of an independent Tamil Eelam.\(^1\) The only difference was that the LTTE had grown considerably in size, strength and popularity. By shrewd maneuvering and establishing a wholly opportunistic alliance with Colombo, the Tigers were able to convert their military prowess into political advantage. This they could achieve without having to surrender their weapons or renounce their separatist demand. People’s Front of the Liberation Tigers (PFLT) got recognition as a political party and was said to be serious about its political role as the authentic representatives of the people. “We are very serious. We want to show India and the world that we are the authentic representatives of the people”,\(^2\) said Prabhakaran in his interview by Anita Pratap of Time magazine.

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\(^1\) *Time*, 2 April 1990.

\(^2\) Ibid., 9 April 1990.
However, as a pre-condition, Prabhakaran insisted that the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution, banning the advocacy of separatism, should be repealed before PFLT would contest the provincial elections. This condition was difficult for Premadasa’s UNP to meet, though they were sympathetic to the Tiger demand, as they did not enjoy two-third majority in the Parliament and the opposition SLFP was strongly opposed to such a concession. Regarding elections, the Government had demanded that the Tigers should disarm before the elections for the Northeastern provincial council were held. Because they had systematically demolished rival Tamil groups over the years and also gained credibility among Tamils for resisting the IPKF, the Tigers were to win the elections hands down. But they were (and still are) loath to surrender their weapons. “We have not given up the demand for Eelam and we will not lay down arms”, Prabhakaran said in his first press meet after he came overground on the departure of the IPKF.³ “Without a viable political solution for Tamil aspirations, India wanted us to lay down arms and learned a bitter lesson. We hope the Sri Lankan Government does not make the same mistake”, he cautioned. In this interview, Prabhakaran also made his distaste of Rajiv Gandhi’s leadership thus: “We are not against India or the Indian people but against the former leadership in India who were against the Tamil liberation struggle and the LTTE.

³ The Indian Express (Madras), 2 April 1990.

In two months of the IPKF pull-out, fighting flared over much of North-East after the Tigers launched attacks on several military installations and police outposts in mid-June. The Tigers apparently wanted elections without surrendering their
weapons. The Tigers wanted to convert their military strength and popularity in political terms through a definitive win in a largely unopposed election. They desperately wanted this democratic recognition to announce the world that they were truly “the sole, legitimate representatives of the Sri Lankan Tamils” and thereby establish their politico-military status. All their gains so far had been through the barrel of the gun and never through democratic process.

The Tigers were ready for manipulative politics which they could ill-afford to play without arms. The Tigers without weapons would be a tiger caged. When the elections were delayed on this count, the Tigers accused Premadasa of wavering in his commitments. The Sri Lankan armed forces resumed its attacks on the Tigers. The Premadasa Government came under criticism for believing that the Tigers were ever really serious about peace. The ethnic conflict was “back to square one”. The general impression that the LTTE was untrustworthy and intransigent had been reinforced. Despite the bloodshed and dislocation, President Premadasa expressed willingness to resume peace talks on condition that they surrendered their weapons. His Deputy Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne, however, vowed, “We will erase the LTTE from the earth.”

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5 Ibid., 23 July 1990.
The Tigers seemed to have a perfect sense of timing, as around this time, on 19 June 1990, an LTTE hit squad gunned down EPRLF Secretary General Padmanabha and 13 senior members in Madras city. The Tamil Nadu Police rounded up 390 Sri Lankan Tamil militants in response. The V. P. Singh Government appealed for an end to hostilities and a return to negotiations. The actual perpetrators of the crime in the heart of the city were not caught immediately. Only some of their accomplices were rounded up along with known militants who had given up militancy and became refugees in the state. Those involved in the murder escaped by road the same night to Nagapattinam coast from where they took the boat to Jaffna. Though the identity of those who committed this carnage was not known, there were no two views that the Tigers were not behind this. It was clear also that the LTTE had transported their internecine wars across the Palk Strait to Tamil Nadu. The people of the state especially the residents of Madras city could not accept the fact that such a mass murder in the evening hours at crowded city area using automatic weapons took place in their capital city. Their sense of security hit a low and their disapproval and aversion of the terror and militancy of the Tigers went sky-high. The threat to national security from the Tamil Tigers became real and present. The confused state of coalition politics in New Delhi failed to countenance the wake-up call.

By August 1990, the ethnic conflict and the internecine killings in Sri Lanka took an ominous new turn. In the Eastern province, some 400 Muslims were

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6 Ibid.
massacred in different incidents. The first such incident occurred during the evening prayers when assailants armed with automatic weapons stormed into the village mosque, shut off the lights and killed about 150 men. The carnage continued for nearly ten days. In retaliation, a Muslim group calling itself “Jehad” began killing Tamils. The Government charged the LTTE for the massacre of Muslims. The Tigers denied the responsibility and instead charged the armed forces for attempting to drive a wedge between the Muslims and the Tigers. The relationship between the Tamils and Muslims thus became increasingly volatile. The Muslims of the Eastern province, though Tamil speaking, had never accepted the leadership of the LTTE. And for that reason, the Sri Lankan Government and armed forces were amicably disposed towards them and used to publicly acknowledge their help and support in fighting militancy. The Sri Lankan Government stood firm on its resolve to fight the Tigers. “No one should call for a cease-fire. We will not capture them”, Deputy Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne declared in Parliament.7

III

In foreign policy matters, the National Front Government of V. P. Singh was quite unlike the highly centralized and personalized style of Rajiv Gandhi Government. Personally, V. P. Singh showed no great enthusiasm in foreign policy matters as he was preoccupied most of the time by more pressing issues concerning the very survival of his Government. His Minister for External Affairs, I. K. Gujral and his Ministry had perfect autonomy in foreign affairs. The DMK, in power in Tamil

7 Time, 27 August 1990.
Nadu, was a strong constituent of the National Front Government. Other than the withdrawal of the IPKF from Sri Lanka as per the mutually agreed time-table, nothing of significance happened in India-Sri Lanka relations. The carnage in Madras committed by a terrorist group from Sri Lanka, which had successfully resisted Indian armed forces in the recent past, was not assessed as a threat to the internal security of the country. Eleven months into the turbulent Indian politics, in November 1990, the National Front Government of V. P. Singh and his centrist Janta Dal (JD) backed by the polar opposites, the rightist Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) and the Left Front, ran out of steam. The arrest of its leader L. K. Advani to stop his effort to build a Hindu temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya, led BJP to withdraw support. After a marathon 11-hour Parliamentary debate, Singh’s Government entered history on a vote of 356 to 151. Rajiv Gandhi informed the President that his party with 215 members in the House would support a Government headed by Chandrasekhar who broke away only the other day from Janta Dal with 61 MPs. Chandrasekhar thus became India’s ninth Prime Minister.

It indeed was not a political arrangement meant to rule India for the remaining term of the Parliament. The Government’s tenure was solely dependent on Congress Party’s backing.8 Rajiv Gandhi wanted to buy time to improve his party’s flagging fortunes before the next general elections. He also hoped he could steer the Chandrasekhar Government through some crucial but unpopular policy decisions without denting his party’s image. While Chandrasekhar, the seasoned politician had struck out on his own in many issues, one of the decisions he obliged

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Rajiv Gandhi with was the dismissal in February of the DMK Government in Tamil Nadu headed by Karunanidhi.\textsuperscript{9} The Chandrasekhar Government also spelt out quite unequivocally the principles that would guide India's policy towards Sri Lanka. The four parameters which could guide India's dealing with Sri Lanka were (1) India will not be a party to a process of political disintegration of Sri Lanka; (2) India will not allow foreign forces to interfere in Sri Lanka; (3) India's armed forces will not be sent again to Sri Lanka; and (4) Indian territory will not be allowed to be used as a base for terrorist activities directed against Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{10} This foreign policy statement by the minority Chandrasekhar Government on Sri Lanka was indeed prompted by the Congress Party and its President Rajiv Gandhi.

The reason for the dismissal of the Karunanidhi Government was the state's awful law and order situation that permitted the free-run of the Tamil Tigers. It was also cited that the members of separatist movements in other parts of India, like ULFA in Assam and the PWG in Andhra Pradesh, were getting trained by the LTTE in Tamil Nadu. Chief Minister Karunanidhi could afford to ignore New Delhi's official policy of keeping the LTTE out of Tamil Nadu and to be blind to Tiger excesses as long as V. P. Singh was Prime Minister. Karunanidhi lost his freedom of action in dealing with the Tigers when Chandrasekhar Government came to power with the help of the Congress Party. Although the decision dismissing DMK Government would appear questionable in the complex Centre-State relations

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 11 February 1991.

\textsuperscript{10} The Times of India (Bombay), 13 January 1991.
compounded by coalition politics, there were no big tears for the DMK Government when it was asked to step down. Subsequent events established that Tamil Nadu was perilously close to mayhem and terror due to a fast spreading gun culture. Despite the war in Sri Lanka, the LTTE still ran an extensive network of business in Tamil Nadu and in 1990 the Tigers also opened contacts with insurgent forces in Assam and Andhra Pradesh. Tragically Rajiv Gandhi had to pay with his life before the malady could be arrested and anarchy prevented.

In March 1991, Ranjan Wijeratne, the abrasive Sri Lankan Minister, who only a few months back vowed to erase the LTTE from the earth, was ironically and almost literally, erased from the earth. In a protected Colombo area, he and his speeding bullet-proof Mercedes out of the convoy of vehicles were blasted to bits. It was a precision car bomb attack. None took credit for this but no one had any doubt that it was the job of the Tigers. The message was clear that the Tigers were in charge not only in Sri Lanka's North-East, but also even in the protected areas in the capital. No target in Sri Lanka or in Tamil Nadu was out of range for the Tigers.

IV

From the installation of the Chandrasekhar government, it was a question of time, when the country went to polls. When the elections came about in May, the analysts and pre-poll surveys indicated that in the three-way contest, the Congress Party was

11 *Asiaweek*, 26 July 1996.
likely to emerge in front as the largest single party but not a clear winner. Before the elections, all the major parties released their manifestoes. Only the Congress Party had spelt out clearly, what according to them should be the foreign policy of India on Sri Lanka. This was about safeguarding the unity and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka and meeting the just and democratic aspirations of minority Tamils within that framework. Rajiv Gandhi made this position clear in his many press interviews and speeches just before the elections. The foreign policy of India under a future Congress Government headed by Rajiv Gandhi was thus perceived by the LTTE as a throwback to the post-Accord years and therefore strategically opposed to their goal of an independent Tamil Eelam. As already indicated, Prabhakaran, in his first press meet after the IPKF pull-out, did not mince words to express his deep animosity towards the Indian leadership that entered into the Accord with Sri Lanka and committed the IPKF to fight the Tigers. Rajiv Gandhi was campaigning round the clock and had dropped the security men who had kept him at the distance from the people from the 1989 elections; “now he wades into the crush of enthusiastic supporters”. The Congress Party, with a more mature Rajiv at its head, was bidding to reclaim the legitimacy it had lost and reverse the nation’s decline.

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13 The motive, as per the charge-sheet in Rajiv Gandhi assassination case, on the part of the Tigers to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi was to pre-empt him from becoming the Prime Minister of India after the 1991 elections. Under him, the LTTE felt, India would go back to its aggressive, interventionist policy on Sri Lanka and extend material assistance to various Tamil groups opposed to the LTTE. Charge-sheet filed by the Investigating Officer, Special Investigation Team, Central Bureau of Investigation in Rajiv Gandhi Assassination Case (RC 9/89/SCB/CBI/SPE/Madras) in the Designated Court No 1 under TADA Act of 1987 (1 Additional City Civil and Sessions Court) Poonamallee, Chennai – 600 104 and taken on file as Calendar Case No. 3/92.


Rajiv Gandhi was killed in the bomb explosion at the venue for an election meeting in Sripurumbadur, near Madras on 21 May 1991. Apart from Rajiv Gandhi, 17 others including the District Police Superintendent were killed in the explosion. The severed head of a female was available at the scene of crime and counted as unidentified and later established to be the suicide killer. The investigation of the case by the Central Bureau of Investigation with assistance from various police agencies in the country and abroad took about a year to complete and the charge-sheet was laid against V. Prabhakaran and 40 others. Out of the 41 accused persons listed, 26 were available in custody to face trial, 12 accounted for as dead and 3 including Prabhakaran and the Tigers’ Intelligence Chief Potti Amman, were absconders. The assassin was identified as Dhanu, a young Sri Lankan Tamil belonging to the LTTE’s elite cadre of suicide killers called “Black Tigers”.

The ingenious fictional idea of a “human bomb” thus became a horrifying reality in the annals of crime. In its novel method, in its precision and planning this ruthless case of suicidal bombing was programmed to remain unsolved and thereby to perpetually shield the perpetrators. The LTTE never wanted to be proved as the killers of Rajiv Gandhi and that too in Tamil Nadu and hence they chose this novel modus operandi. They had planned it so well that, in the event of the needle of suspicion pointing at them, they could convincingly deny any motive on their part. For this, at the preparation stage itself, they sent two separate emissaries to Rajiv Gandhi to tell him that the LTTE was for a rapprochement with him. One was Arjuna Sithambalam, a Sri Lankan Tamil living in London and a Director of Swana
Bank and he met Rajiv Gandhi as desired by Kittu\(^\text{16}\) of LTTE International Secretariat in London. The other LTTE messenger was Kashi Anandan,\(^\text{17}\) a Sri Lankan Tamil and a Tamil poet of repute living in Madras from 1990. He could meet Rajiv Gandhi in Delhi using his clout with the journalists and intelligence officers in Madras. These meetings in March 1991 were not made public. Yet, immediately after the assassination when speculation started about the involvement of the LTTE in the heinous act of terrorism, Kittu from LTTE’s International Secretariat in London made public these secret meetings in an attempt to convince the world that the Tigers had no motive to kill Rajiv Gandhi. One of the intercepted coded wireless messages from LTTE headquarters to the assassination-mission chief Raghuvaran alias Sivarasan the day after the assassination when decoded subsequently read thus:

“Our people have even told the people at higher level that we are not involved in this”.\(^\text{18}\)

These meetings were in March 1991 while the criminal conspiracy to commit murder was afloat in September the previous year when V. P. Singh Government

\(^{16}\) Kittu alias Krishna Kumar was the Jaffna Commander of the LTTE and was injured in action. After amputation of a leg, Kittu was in Madras looking after the “political activities” of the LTTE especially during the IPKF operations. From Madras, Kittu went on to head the LTTE’s International Secretariat in London. Kittu was on his way to Jaffna on LTTE-owned merchant vessel m.v. Ahat, on Prabhakaran’s orders to join as his deputy, when the vessel was intercepted by Indian Navy off the coast of Madras in 1993. After permitting the sailors to swim to safety, Kittu and other LTTE cadres on board blasted themselves and the vessel, which went down with the military cargo.

\(^{17}\) Chuming out revolutionary poetry, Kashi Anandan is considered the bard of Eelam. Kashi Anandan was a Central Committee member of the Peoples Front of Liberation Tigers (PFLT). A compilation of his poems was a prescribed text book for M. A. (Tamil), University of Madras in the ’80s and subsequently taken out of the syllabus on the plea that the poems were too inflammatory. Kashi Anandan was forthright in his interview that Eelam was unattainable without India’s help and Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination by the LTTE was a strategic blunder.

\(^{18}\) The wireless intercepts form part of the evidence adduced in Rajiv Gandhi case. The communications pertaining to this operation were coded and the agencies concerned were unable to decode it for quite sometime. Finally, when they were decoded, it threw light on every aspect of the cunning criminal conspiracy.
started tottering and the talk of fresh elections commenced in the Indian media. The
hiring of the “safe-houses” for this operation by Sri Lankan refugees at the direction
of the LTTE’s mission chief, which was reckoned as the earliest “physical
manifestations” of the criminal conspiracy, commenced in September. The purpose
of these meetings arranged with the knowledge of intelligence agencies was also to
prompt them to discount the LTTE from their threat perception on the life of Rajiv
Gandhi and thereby to lull them to complacency. The Tigers were successful on this
count also.

The investigation of this horrendous act of terrorism exposed the LTTE’s vast
network of contact points and support bases in Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu was
being used by the Tigers basically for smuggling clothing, commercial explosives,
fuel, medicines etc. With the help of the DK activists, the Tigers were dispatching
their injured cadres for medical treatment in the state. In Coimbatore, it was found
that the Tigers were getting crude grenades made in small scale industrial units. In
their changed equations with India since 1987, it was apparent that the Tigers were
not solely dependent on Tamil Nadu for their war efforts in Sri Lanka. Especially in
the matter of sophisticated weapons and ammunition, the LTTE had reliable sources
of supply unknown to India or Sri Lanka then. The Tigers’ survival therefore
depended on their free access and mobility within Tamil Nadu, their lifeline of
support for medicine, fuel and material. Had he become the Prime Minister – and all
opinion polls said he would – Rajiv Gandhi would almost certainly have cracked
down on the Tigers’ use of India for a haven.¹⁹

It was found that some of the LTTE members involved in Rajiv Gandhi assassination case including its mission chief Sivarasan were members of the Tiger hit squad that had gunned down EPRLF’s Padmanabha and others in Madras in June 1990. The arrest of Santhan, an LTTE cadre from a hide-out in Madras suburb yielded the clue. Based on the confession by Santhan, the state police “Q” Branch reopened the investigation in Padmanabha murder case. Another LTTE cadre arrested in Rajiv Gandhi case, Shanker alias Koneswaran, confessed to his assigned role of killing EPRLF’s Varadaraja Perumal who was kept in a secure location in North India at that time by Indian intelligence agencies. Similarly, there were a few other LTTE cadres all linked up to the same mission chief Sivarasan meant for various “tasks” at places far apart like Gwalior, Jaipur and Delhi, the specific details of which could not be ascertained. It would be reasonable to presume that in the event of any backlash of violence in the wake of the assassination, the LTTE had planned a string of terrorist incidents across India and more so in Tamil Nadu with a view to confuse Indians and destabilize India.

The investigation of Rajiv Gandhi assassination also brought to light the serious security implications of the Sri Lankan refugee problem in Tamil Nadu as the “safe-houses” used by the LTTE operatives were actually hired by the Sri Lankan...

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20 Santhan, whose death sentence in Rajiv Gandhi case was confirmed by the Supreme Court, was nabbed by the CBI while in sleep and before he could reach his cyanide vial.

21 A smuggler contact of the LTTE from Vedaranyam coast, Jagadeesan Pillai, was to escort the LTTE cadre to Gwalior for this purpose.
refugee families. The conspiracy unraveled also indicated the lack of trust of the Tigers in the Tamils of the mainland. Those Tamils of the mainland who got involved in the criminal conspiracy did so because they were indoctrinated specifically for this purpose and they presumably had only incomplete awareness of the criminal conspiracy they were part of. Once the cover of the Tigers was blown, they requested the DK activists to step in to limit the damage either by shielding the offenders or by helping them escape to Jaffna.

Another matter of grave security concern that had surfaced was that the LTTE had been instrumental in setting up a militant outfit called “Tamil National Retrieval Force” in Tamil Nadu. For this purpose, unemployed Tamil youth with strong DK predilections were recruited and sent to Sri Lanka for arms training. These cadres trained in handling weapons and explosives were placed back in Tamil Nadu with wireless communication equipment and ciphers to function as the private army of the LTTE in India. The wireless intercepts indicated the extreme secrecy surrounding the raising and functioning of this underground outfit. This was meant to function under the LTTE’s command mainly for subversion and sabotage in Tamil Nadu. The LTTE became a proscribed organization in India mainly on this startling revelation. Two of those cadres figured as accused in the Rajiv Gandhi case for their role in trying to shield the real culprits on the orders of the LTTE headquarters.22

22 As disclosed by Ravi alias Ravichandran and Mahesh alias Susindran in their confessions duly recorded under section 15 of the Terrorists and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act 1987 (TADA Act, now defunct) and form part of his case records. Weapons, grenades, gold biscuits and wireless communication equipments were seized from them.
The day after the assassination, the Union Government headed by Chandrasekhar got the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to form a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to investigate the murder. A week later, Government instituted, in consultation with the Chief Justice of India, the Justice Verma Commission of Inquiry whose terms of reference were confined to looking at the possible security lapses and suggesting remedial measures. The Congress (I) Party, headed by Narasimha Rao, expressed dissatisfaction over the institutional arrangements for the probe and wanted the terms of reference of Justice Verma Commission to be expanded to include probing the criminal conspiracy behind the assassination and all its ramifications. At that point of time, the police investigations had not effected any breakthrough in this blind case of suicidal bombing. Although Government did make a request to the Justice Verma Commission to consider expanding its terms of reference to cover the criminal conspiracy angle also, Justice Verma declined to do so stating that such a matter was best left to any agency like the SIT to probe into.

When Narasimha Rao became Prime Minister in June 1991, he had to perforce meet the demand of his party he had earlier aired. He went ahead and appointed Justice M. C. Jain, a retired Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, in August 1991, to head another Commission of Inquiry for this purpose. The two high-level Commissions of Inquiry had gone deep into the breach of security and criminal conspiracy aspects

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23 Justice J. S. Verma was a sitting Judge of the Supreme Court of India, who rose to become the Chief Justice of India and subsequently the Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission. The report of the Verma Commission tabled in Parliament was accepted by Parliament.

24 India Today, 28 February 1995.
of the assassination case. Although Justice Jain Commission proceedings and report ran into various political controversies, at no time, both these commissions doubted the veracity of the findings of the investigation of the criminal case that named the LTTE operatives as responsible for the carnage.25

The investigation of the case resulted in a court trial and a judicial verdict of ‘guilty’ against those who were available to face the trial. The judicial verdict had been upheld by the Supreme Court of India. Significantly this was the first successful investigation and prosecution of a terrorist crime involving the LTTE either in India or in Sri Lanka and also one of the very few successful police investigations of major terrorist incidents across the world. The outcome of the case had upturned the credibility of the LTTE as a liberation enterprise. Prior to 1991, the LTTE activities were of only passing interest to Western and Asian nations. That indifference was reinforced by Colombo’s appalling human-rights record and the perception in the West of Tamil guerrillas as underdogs.26 Even before the judicial verdict in this case, the US included the LTTE in their list of terrorist organizations revised annually. The inclusion for the first time of the LTTE as a major terrorist group in the appendix to the US State Department’s annual terrorism report entitled “Pattern of Global Terrorism 1994” was based on the affirmation by the US Intelligence about the LTTE’s involvement in Rajiv Gandhi assassination.27

25 For a brief critique of the political controversies thrown up by the Interim Report of the Jain Commission, see India Today, 18-24 November 1997 and 2-8 December 1997.

26 Asiamweek, 26 July 1996.

27 Pioneer (New Delhi), 4 May 1995.
Government of India and the CBI had on several occasions acknowledged the cooperation and institutional assistance in the investigation of the assassination case by Premadasa Government and its police and armed forces. However, the likely request for the extradition of Prabhakaran and the two others of the LTTE had created quite a stir in both the countries at that time. India and Sri Lanka had not concluded any extradition treaty between themselves. And therefore, the procedure for extradition proceedings applicable to Commonwealth countries was to be followed in the instant case. It is pertinent to remind at this juncture that Sri Lanka’s request to India for extradition of Prabhakaran and Uma Maheswaran in the wake of the Pondy Bazaar shoot-out in 1982 was not favourably considered by India and they were not extradited.

The LTTE was in total control of the Jaffna peninsula in 1991 and the legitimate Government of Sri Lanka had no means of access there. The arrests of Prabhakaran and his deputies were thus beyond them and as such their extradition to India to face trial in Indian court in the Rajiv Gandhi case had only academic value. Extradition, being an exercise under the international law, involves sovereign decision-making at various critical stages. The country, to which the request is made, has to first decide whether the request should be entertained. Again, after the arrest of the wanted men and subsequent judicial decision-making as to whether they should be extradited, the top executive has to decide whether or not they should be actually extradited.
After the charge-sheet was filed in court and before the court issued formal extradition request through Government of India, President Premadasa hinted in public that the extradition request for the LTTE leaders might not be favourably considered. This was his exercise in politics to tease both India and the LTTE and thereby appease his Sinhalese-Buddhist constituency. India did not make the formal extradition request because the wanted men would never be apprehended and India’s request would only pave the way for some unpleasant political antics. Ironically, President Premadasa did not live long enough to reject India’s extradition request having been killed while watching the May Day rally in 1993. And, again ironically, it was a suicide bombing by the Tigers. The formal request for extradition was made after Chandrika Kumaratunga became President. Jaffna was still out-of-bounds to Government of Sri Lanka but the extradition request was mainly to appease the Congress party dissidents who charged the Narasimha Rao Government of not doing the best to get the killers of Rajiv Gandhi to stand trial in court. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao decided to forward the formal request for extradition solely to thwart his political opponents from acquiring critical mass on this count. For President Chandrika Kumaratunga, bitter about the LTTE’s reneging on the peace agreement, the extradition request was a chance to further distance India from the Tamil separatists.

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29 Ibid.
The Narasimha Rao Government in New Delhi did not pursue the proactive policy on the Sri Lankan ethnic question as outlined in their election manifesto and as asserted by Rajiv Gandhi. Pranab Mukherjee, the External Affairs Minister in Narasimha Rao Government termed the ethnic strife in Sri Lanka as “an internal dispute”. India’s Sri Lanka policy during Narasimha Rao Government was highly restrained and sensible without being “hands-off”. His Government’s approach was on the following lines: (1) India will continue to be supportive of the legitimate political, social and cultural aspirations of the minority Tamils in Sri Lanka; (2) India opposes the violent and terrorist methods of the LTTE to achieve these aspirations; (3) India would be supportive of the initiatives to resolve the crisis through negotiations; (4) India would not take any active role in resolving the crisis as India’s sincere efforts in the past were subjected to criticism by all parties; (5) Apart from the specific aspects relating to the ethnic crisis, India will try to develop the bilateral relations and cooperation in the political, economic and cultural spheres with Sri Lanka; (6) The Union Government and state Government of Tamil Nadu would ensure that the LTTE does not have bases and hide-outs in India. More than these policy directives put in place when Premadasa was still the President, Narasimha Rao Government was keen to have a practical working relationship with Sri Lankan Government.

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The high-profile police investigation of the assassination case with the assistance from Sri Lankan security agencies, the vigorous pursuit of the Tigers and their facilitators in Tamil Nadu under the AIADMK Government of J. Jayalalitha and the unearthing of their safe houses and support bases gave the impression to Sri Lanka and to the world that India was following a more restrained and mature foreign policy on Sri Lanka. The proscription of the Tigers and the open repudiation of their brand of terrorism were the highlights that reassured the Sri Lankans of a definite Indian stand against the Tigers. The Congress Government also saw the transformation in Sri Lankan politics. The UNP Government gave way to the Government by Chandrika Kumaratunga and her People's Alliance who were voted to power on a clear mandate for peace. Since Chandrika Kumaratunga came to power in 1994, India-Sri Lanka relations have been on the upturn. Colombo was in favour of better relations with India and this has been the major plank of President Kumaratunga's foreign policy. Narasimha Rao Government reciprocated her gesture by stepping up naval surveillance in the Palk Strait and thereby facilitated Sri Lankan navy to successfully intercept two major Tiger arms shipments headed for Jaffna.\footnote{\textit{Asia Week}, 17 November 1995.} President Kumaratunga, on assuming office, held out a hand to the LTTE and made fairly substantive proposals for resolving the ethnic problem after a cease-fire and three rounds of discussions with the LTTE. These efforts failed and the LTTE reverted to military operations. The official spokesman of the Government of India described the proposals as a bold attempt and a positive step towards a peaceful solution requiring the most serious consideration of all concerned.\footnote{Dixit, n. 31, p. 303.}
While Narasimha Rao Government was a minority Government to start with and acquired majority on the way, Deve Gowda Government established and institutionalized coalition politics at the Centre whereby regional and fringe political parties started exerting their influence, vastly disproportionate to their size and strength, in policy making at the Centre including in foreign affairs. Since then, one of the two mainstream Dravidian parties had consistently found its representation in the Union Cabinet. Splinter groups from these Dravidian parties had also been influential at the national level. Thanks to Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination, the Sri Lankan ethnic strife had ceased to be a major issue for the Dravidian parties in the state since 1991. However, if the ethnic conflict continues in Sri Lanka with the usual dose of bloodletting and misery, there is every chance for the subject to again surface in Tamil Nadu politics, which, in turn, would exert pressure on the Government of India. The response to the pressure would be dependent on the nature of coalition in power in New Delhi and the Dravidian party in power in the state.

India formally entered the era of coalition Governments at the Centre in the 1990s. While it is so, it can be contended with a lot of credibility that the philosophy and political expediency behind coalition Governments were latent in all Governments at the Centre since independence. 34 The Congress Party is in effect the political front of what was left of an enormous attempt at social cohesion brought

34 For details see: Nalini Kant Jha, “Socio-Political Coalitions and Foreign Policy: The Indian Experience”, Pondicherry University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (Pondicherry), vol. 1, no. 1, January-June 2001, pp. 175-99
about by the able Indian leadership to mobilize the historic struggle for independence. This argument also explains the steady decline of the party due to the slackening of social cohesiveness since independence and especially after Jawaharlal Nehru's stewardship. The Janta Party that came to power in 1977 and the Janta Dal voted to power in 1989 are also, in the same sense, examples of internal coalitions hastily put together, that failed to hold together for long. With the onset of formal coalition Governments in the 1990s, Indian politics has come to accept the reality of its existence and the indications are that it is likely to stay that way into the foreseeable future.

Inder Kumar Gujral, during his visit to Sri Lanka as India's External Affairs Minister in Deva Gowda Government in 1997 was categorical that the ethnic conflict was Sri Lanka's internal problem and India would "never interfere" in Sri Lankan affairs. This formal announcement of the hands-off policy of India in Sri Lanka's ethnic crisis raised some criticism mainly because from the security perspective, peninsular India cannot totally insulate itself from the bloody engagement between Sri Lankan forces and the Tamil Tigers across the narrow Palk Strait. Even concerns of security apart, India cannot remain for long unaffected by the prolonged ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka due to the Tamil Nadu factor. The formal announcement by Gujral was part of his efforts to repair India's bridges of friendship with the neighbouring countries for improving the international system. His neighbourhood policy, famously called the Gujral Doctrine, was based on the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty and settlement of dispute through
peaceful methods. The doctrine also recognizes India's responsibility as the powerful country in the region in not expecting immediate reciprocity to its gestures of goodwill towards its smaller neighbours like Sri Lanka. By 1996, the DMK was back to power in Tamil Nadu. Chief Minister Karunanidhi helped Gujral in the task of working out a means of ensuring that bona fide fishing activity in the Palk Strait was not hampered by security worries in Sri Lanka.

VIII

The efficient patrolling by Indian Navy and Coast Guard ensured that LTTE did not ferry Tamil refugees in hordes to Tamil Nadu and as a consequence the smuggling activities by the LTTE across the Palk Strait for its war efforts back home had also come down. For such efficiency, mutual trust and a certain amount of co-ordination between Indian initiatives and the tiny Sri Lankan navy was an operational imperative. The 50th anniversary celebrations of Sri Lanka's navy held on 9 December 2000 witnessed the commissioning of helicopter-carrying Off-shore Patrol Vessel SLNS Sayura. SLNS Sayura is the rechristened former Indian navy vessel INS Sarayu. This is the first known military hardware deal between India and Sri Lanka\(^{35}\) and this came about without the usual fanfare or controversy.

The global reach of the LTTE had all along been underestimated by all especially by India. As a sub-national player, the Tigers had managed to expand their sphere of clandestine activities almost across the globe in the 90s. The Tigers have

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\(^{35}\) *The Hindu*, 10 December 2000.
become far more than a jungle army in an isolated war. As indicated earlier, the pattern of the smuggling activities unearthed in the wake of Rajiv Gandhi assassination was suggestive of alternate and reliable supply lines available to the LTTE about which both India and Sri Lanka were not aware. The LTTE functions like a multinational corporation with resources all over the world. By the early 90s, the LTTE had substantially diversified their gun-running network. Sources extended their reach to cover Southeast Asia and Pakistan's booming Afghan arms bazaar. The LTTE operatives appear to have had no problem operating in Pakistan. To the extent that Islamabad's security services were aware of their presence, any enemy of India was a friend of Pakistan. \(^{36}\)

Their maritime activities came to light for the first time in December 1990 when Malaysian authorities in Penang seized a merchant vessel, m.v.Sunbird, carrying military cargo. The statements by the crew of the vessel gave the idea that the LTTE was the real owners of the vessel and the military cargo was destined to be offloaded near Nagapattinam in India. In November 1991 Indian Navy intercepted a small merchant vessel m.v. Tong Nova 10 nautical miles off Karaikal (not far away from Nagapattinam) in India. The ship was found to carry contraband items including military hardware and explosives and it was owned by an LTTE front company. The third such incident involving an LTTE vessel was the interception of m.v.Ahat by the Indian Navy in January 1993 in the international waters 440 nautical

\(^{36}\) For details of LTTE's international operations see Peter Chalk, "Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's International Organization and Operations - A Preliminary Analysis", *Commentary* (a Canadian Security Intelligence Service Publication, Ottawa) no. 77, 17 March 2000
miles off Madras coast. When intercepted, the vessel was drifting with 'not under control' signal on. The navy directed the ship to sail to Indian territorial waters for inspection. Near Madras, the LTTE cadres on board including senior leader Kittu allowed the ship's Sri Lankan crew to swim to safety. Thereafter they blasted the ship and went down along with it. The nine Sri Lankan Tamil crew members faced prosecution and trial in Indian courts and their conviction upheld by the Supreme Court. A curious aspect of this case was that while the naval action was on, the LTTE, through their contacts in Madras, filed habeas corpus petition in the High Court of Madras. And this came about not long after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. In August 1994 another LTTE vessel m. v. Swanee left the Ukrainian Black Sea port of Nikolayev loaded with explosives: 50 tonnes of TNT and 10 tonnes of RDX. By the time the vessel arrived off the northeastern Sri Lankan coast, she had a different name. The deadly cargo was off-loaded and transferred to jungle bases. Some of the Ukrainian RDX was put to horrific use on 31 January 1995 to explode the Central Bank building in Colombo killing 91 and injuring over 1,400. The transnational and often secretive presence of its front organizations is now increasingly unsettling Governments in Asia and the West.

The Tigers were seen in battle fatigue for the first time in 1991. From a jungle guerrilla force with a terrorism front, the LTTE graduated to a conventional army in the North with a guerrilla front in the East and capable of urban terrorist

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37 The case substantially involving the law of the international waters and terrorist activities was investigated by the CBI as RC 1 (S)/93-CBI/VSP and charge-sheet placed in a Vizag Court against the sailors including the captain of the vessel. The appeal arising out of this court case was finally decided by the Supreme Court in Criminal Appeal No 823 of 1996 and the Apex Court held them guilty of various offences.

38 *Asia weekly*, 26 July 1996.
missions anywhere in Sri Lanka or Tamil Nadu. Their naval wing “Sea Tigers” also became effective around this time. Led by Soosai, a relative of Prabhakaran, the naval wing has an estimated strength of 3,500 cadres, a fleet of boats fitted with powerful outboard motors and weapons seized from Sri Lankan navy. The Sea Tigers have added a new dimension to the conflict and emerged as a major factor in the balance of power.39 The LTTE acquired anti-aircraft capability in 1995 while they were negotiating with Chandrika Kumaratunga Government and demonstrated its efficacy immediately after the talks broke down and they took to arms in April 1995.40 By the end of the decade, the LTTE had added artillery also to its repertoire and demonstrated its lethality in their highly successful run over of the Sri Lankan military garrison at Elephant Pass. Initially the LTTE depended on artillery seized from the army after successful raids; later the LTTE procured artillery equipment in the black market and transported them by sea to Wanni jungles. The LTTE allegedly recruited foreign mercenaries on contract basis to teach them the finer points of artillery deployment. With the fall of the Elephant Pass military garrison to the Tigers, an entire field ordnance unit of the Sri Lankan army fell into LTTE hands.41

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, an estimated 700,000 living in Western Europe, Canada, Australia and much of the developed world are the main financiers of the LTTE and the most vociferous advocates for the demand for the Tamil Eelam. The immigration status of these mostly middle-class salaried expatriates is

40 Ibid., 31 May 1995.
41 Frontline, 26 May 2000.
that of asylum seeker or political refugee. Besides the financial support they give to the cause of the Tamil Eelam (an estimated US $ 2 million monthly), the Eelam bodies run by them campaign on behalf of the Tamil Eelam. “The LTTE has more branches outside Sri Lanka than Colombo has embassies.” They publish periodicals and pamphlets to propagate the gospel of the Tamil Eelam. Their main objective has, however, been to cut off foreign aid to Sri Lanka and to stop arms supply to the Sri Lankan government. The war to win international hearts and minds is conducted at a level of sophistication far more advanced than anything Colombo has reached. The LTTE has been singled out, funded and nurtured by the Tamil diaspora all along because of its steadfast commitment to achieving the Eelam. In the wake of the meeting between Norwegian peace envoy Erik Solheim and V Prabhakaran in Jaffna, the Sri Lankan diaspora were anxious that the peace makers might force the LTTE to accept Eelam minus. The alarm that had spread through the community from Canada to Australia found expression in the opinions on the Internet. Obviously, in order to appease its constituency and financiers and make them feel that this is only a tactical move with no change in their strategic objective, the LTTE’s aggressive statement from London had listed the “essential prerequisites” that would have to be met by the government before peace talks. The Tigers are, therefore, free to negotiate and settle for anything short of Eelam only at the cost of betraying their world ambassadors with small incomes and deep pockets.

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42 Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong), 12 September 1991.

43 Asiaweek, 26 July 1996.
With the scaling down of the activities in India in the wake of Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination, the Tigers have more than compensated by establishing reliable training and procurement bases elsewhere. The Tigers were found to remain active in Myanmar until 1996 when through diplomatic efforts Colombo had been able to prevail upon Myanmar to close it down. At the same time, Tigers are found to be active all along the Andaman Sea ports of Thailand especially Phuket. The detection of sophisticated sonar equipment led the Thai naval officers to search Phuket’s shipyards and they found a half-built mini submarine for the LTTE. It is pertinent to point out here that the Tigers’ attempt to manufacture a mini-submarine in Mahabalipuram near Madras in February 1993 was thwarted by the Tamil Nadu police.

IX

On 21 April 2000, the Sri Lankan military garrison at the strategic Elephant Pass fell to the Tigers’ artillery attack. With this, the land routes to the Jaffna peninsula got snapped and reaching supplies to the thousands of soldiers in Jaffna would be a problem as Sea Tigers had virtually cut off supplies reaching by sea. The military balance in Sri Lanka’s North-east thus shifted in favour of the Tigers. Kumaratunga Government approached India first and her Foreign Minister called on Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee and External Affairs Minister Jaswanth Singh. Jaswanth Singh acknowledged in Parliament that India had received some requests from Sri Lanka and said that India was ready to contribute to the return of peace to Sri Lanka. At the same time he ruled out any military intervention by Indian armed forces. The
Indian Government, he said, would resort to humanitarian measures to mitigate the hardship of civilians. The Government's stand that it would extend humanitarian aid to Sri Lankan Government was not to the liking of some of the ruling coalition partners like DMK, Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) and Maranalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (MDMK). DMK expressed their protest in not inviting their senior minister for the meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). Chief Minister Karunanidhi was specifically invited to New Delhi for discussions. In New Delhi, Karunanidhi had strenuously lobbied with the other constituents of the ruling alliance and successfully stymied the government's initial inclination to send arms and ammunition. In a bid to reassure his allies, Vajpayee was forced to reiterate that the Government had ruled out the sending or selling of arms to Sri Lanka.

Although the Vajpayee Government remained committed to the concept of a united Sri Lanka, certain pro-LTTE and chauvinistic parties, on whose support the Government is dependent, want a reversal of this policy. V. Gopalswamy (Vaiko), the MDMK leader is an avowed LTTE supporter. A combination of forces including such politicians and the Tamil Nadu Government of DMK wanted to preempt even humanitarian relief being sent to Sri Lanka. From the security perspective, the developments in Sri Lanka were admittedly of very serious nature as far as India was concerned. But India was caught in a dilemma thrown up by the imperatives of coalition politics. In the all-party meeting convened by the Government in New

44 Frontline, 26 May 2000.

45 Vaiko figured as a witness in Rajiv Gandhi assassination case. When it came to giving evidence against the LTTE, Vaiko went back on his statement before the investigators. The court declared him "hostile to the prosecution" and he was permitted to be cross-examined by the Public Prosecutor. Vaiko incidentally was the only prosecution witness in this case to turn hostile. See Frontline, 22 April 2000.
Delhi, the participants endorsed the Government’s stand against any military intervention. The convening of the meeting of all parties by the Prime Minister for evolving a consensus on India’s approach to the crisis in Sri Lanka is seen in political circles as the Government’s strategy to bypass the pro-LTTE voices within the ruling coalition.46 As the perception of national interest is not always objective, the nature of regime in general and the compulsions of coalition politics in particular influence the process as well as the substance of foreign policy.

New Delhi had, in the meanwhile, sounded a few countries as part of its efforts to find a solution to the conflict. The response was said to be lukewarm, though some efforts were on in London, Paris and Washington to bring the two warring sides to the negotiating table. The Indian authorities seemed to have discussed the crisis in Sri Lanka with the US Administration which was supportive of India’s hands-off policy. Washington was itself not in a mood to get involved in Sri Lanka.

After India turned down the Sri Lankan plea for assistance, Colombo appealed to countries as diverse as Israel and Pakistan for help. Pakistan was requested for tanks and the response was cautious. Colombo announced that it was restoring ties with Tel Aviv, broken off more than 40 years ago. Israel had sold K-fir fighters to Sri Lanka. Colombo had given the assurance that it would not have troops from a third country. At this juncture, Indian Government’s overt position was one of neutrality and non-intervention. New Delhi’s belief was that the international

46 Jha, n. 34.
community would not allow Sri Lanka to break up. At the same time the concerns remained that the LTTE would assume a Taliban-like status of a "state actor" and destabilize the entire region with its brand of politics and terror.⁴⁷

While the coalition politics at the Union Government had vastly reduced India's policy options on the deteriorating ethnic strife in Sri Lanka, it had contributed in a way to have a mature and measured response unlike in the past. India had learned from past mistakes. No doubt, India's national interests would be better served by building peace in Sri Lanka and keeping it united. The IPKF experiment became fundamentally flawed when India attempted a military solution to an essentially political problem. For India to become militarily involved a second time in the affairs of Sri Lanka would be a strategic error of monumental proportions. What is needed all the time is to establish communication lines with both parties to the conflict and work as an impartial mediator. Even more important is to ensure that the impact of the conflict does not affect Indian polity.

⁴⁷ Frontline, 26 May 2000.