ABSTRACT

INDO-SRI LANKA RELATIONS: NEHRU TO INDIRA GANDHI

With the failure of Norway-brokered another peace effort, to bring the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE to the negotiating table in the month of July 2004, once again the need has arisen to analyse prospects for peace in South Asia. Following post-cold war trends in international politics and with the emergence of new power equations and calculations, the great powers of the world shifted their focus from ideological confrontation and objective of containment to the making of a new world order, where patterns of ‘calculated cooperation’ would be followed, and also where no single country should be allowed to impose hegemonism or to be exorbitantly communal in any region of the world.

Given to these considerations, this is the most suitable time to analyse India’s relations with its neighbouring countries. I have therefore chosen the topic “Indo-Sri Lanka Relations: Nehru to Indira Gandhi” my research.

The basic aim of this research is to study why India has been blamed to be hegemonistic in the region and what are the linkages between India’s ‘Big Brother’ attitude and Sri Lanka’s ethnic havoc, which has the potential to inspire other secessionist movements in the
South Asian region. The objective is to focus upon the reasons responsible for spoiling relations of two neighbouring countries which have been tied by a number of cultural, linguistic, and religious ties for centuries.

This research work has been divided into nine chapters. I have tried to analyse though the experience of colonialism, common membership of UN, NAM etc. and compulsions of developing economies led the two countries to respond in a similar way to many international crisis. There was consensus among them on basic tenets of Non-alignment, NIEO, Indian Ocean as a 'Zone of Peace'. On the broader issues of general disarmament and arms control, there was a near unanimity between these two countries. Because of the massive acquisition of arms and ammunitions both conventional and nuclear by the great powers the world was on the verge of a catastrophe. Sri Lanka and India which belonged to the third world, could not afford to spend heavily on armaments because of the inbuilt restrictions on their economies. Obviously any international movement for disarmament found an active response from these states as, in the long run, their own people would be saved from annihilation in a global warfare.

However, differences in their perceptions to some multilateral arms control agreements like NPT were noticeable. While Sri Lanka supported it by signing and ratifying at an early date, India’s reluctance to sign it appeared to be mainly because it wanted to keep its options
open particularly in view of the fact that China had already acquired nuclear capability. The issue of South Asia as a nuclear free zone constituted another area of divergence. A possible explanation for Sri Lanka’s support to the proposal emerged from the notion of a security threat from India. Along with such a fear-psychosis it had also to be kept in mind that Sri Lanka had signed the NPT. But it is noteworthy that even if the respective stands of both the countries manifested divergence on some issues, such differences did not affect the basic strands of bilateral interaction.

However, certain bilateral issues like the issue of Kachchaturu and the citizenship status issue, have definitely enhanced the tensions between two neighbours. Both the countries expressed their claim over a small and unpopulated island of Kachchaturu which is situated at the Palk strait region. The Prime Minister Indira Gandhi accepted Sri Lankan claim over the island as she did not want to spoil her friendship with Sirimavo Bandaranaike. For that purpose India entered into the Indira Gandhi-Sirimavo Bandaranaike Agreement of January 1974, which not only settled the issue of Kachchaturu but also indicated India’s willingness for evolving a policy of friendship and mutual co-operation with its neighbours. Though no problem was left so far the location of maritime boundary between the two countries was concerned but because of the confusing language of Article 4 and 5 of the 1974 Agreement, Indian fishermen particularly from Tamil Nadu suffered a great setback.
The misery of leading a tough life filled with exploitation and the pain of losing their fundamental rights in particular the citizenship right, ultimately gave birth to a major irritant i.e. the citizenship status issue, that spoiled the cordial bilateral relations of two countries for a long time.

Hence, another irritant between Indo- Sri Lanka relations was the question of stateless persons of Indian origin. Just after its independence in 1948, the discriminatory policies of Sri Lankan Government, resulted in the loosening of citizenship by the people of Indian origin. To sort out the problem Jawahar Lal Nehru pursued a number of bilateral talks with his Sri Lankan counterpart but he could never accept the principle of compulsory repatriation as it might have set an example for other African and Asian countries. Besides he always believed that those who had contributed in strengthening the economy of Sri Lanka and stayed their for generations, could not be taken off the right of citizenship all of a sudden and that Sri Lanka just wanted to lessen the number of the people of Indian origin, thus regarded these proposals as discriminatory. Even Nehru-Kotelawala Pact of January 1954 could not be implemented as Sri Lankan Government accepted only two categories i.e. Indian Nationals and Ceylon Nationals but completely neglected the third category of ‘stateless persons’. As compared to Nehru’s firm approach, Lal Bahadur Shastri preferred an accommodative approach by entering into 1964 Shastri - Bandaranaike Pact. In fact to settle citizenship issue, India made
conflict. And these policies were also responsible for the rise of Tamil militancy. Tamil organizations like TULF, LTTE etc. sprang up very quickly to fight discrimination done by the Sinhala Sri Lankan Government. As the communal problem originated due to injustice done with Tamils of Indian origin or estate workers, Indian Government directly or indirectly has always been involved in this problem. Indira Gandhi offered India's good offices and appointed G. Parthasarathy as the chief negotiator. However, this is also a reality that during her times, India provided training to Tamil militants on Indian soil in order to militarily pressurize the Jayewardene Government. Indira Gandhi wanted the legitimate and genuine demands of the Tamils to be met but within the framework of a united Sri Lanka. Her successor Rajiv Gandhi, however, treated the subject in a different manner and involved India militarily in the ethnic havoc of the island, and faced a great diplomatic failure. IPKF operation proved to be a big failure, both Tamil militants and Sri Lankan Government turned hostile to India and ultimately India faced great embarrassment and it had to call IPKF back from Sri Lanka. It did not stop here but Rajiv Gandhi paid a heavy price as he was killed by one suicide bomber of LTTE. Till then all the successive Indian Governments have maintained sort of neutral stand and have avoided (generally) reacting on developments occurring in the island. Let it be western powers or Sri Lankan Government or LTTE or Indian Government itself, every body knows that without Indian involvement it
will be very difficult to settle the ethnic problem. Realizing this fact only LTTE asked India to be involved in the peace process, Sri Lankan Government too under the western pressure, requested India to play an active role in the peace process, but India has preferred to watch all the developments quietly. Therefore, US backed Norway has taken over the responsibility of peace-brokers. Even Norweigians keep India informed of all the developments which occur in peace process. In February 2002 Sri Lankan Government and LTTE signed Norwegian-brokered peace truce. Things were about to be finalized but first due to some ingenuine and unnecessary demands of LTTE and then due to bitter power politics of Sri Lanka, thus created a stalemate in peace talks.

We should never forget that our region is heir to a centuries-old tradition of tolerance, pluralism and creative interaction. We need to recapture this ethos in the modern context. In the post-cold war world of globalization, countries around the world are increasingly focusing on regional economics. Political disputes have been resolved diplomatically or quietly deferred for tackling at a more opportune time. Conflict has given way to cooperation; dialogue moderates differences. There is a clear recognition that hostility only stunts economies, inhibits trade and retards progress. In words of Former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee: “If we in South Asia look back objectively at the experiences of our freedom struggles and of our nation building, the one stark lesson that stands out is the imperative of forging a unity based on our
commonalities. Whenever we have dissipated our energies in internal squabbling, external forces have come in to sort our differences and stayed on to exploit our resources.”

Hence, both India and Sri Lanka should understand that their search for pragmatism, maturity and wisdom will have to involve both Governments and civil society. It will also require a widespread understanding that in today’s contest, collective regional interest is an expression of enlightened self-interest. Both the Governments may avoid the mistakes committed by predecessors as time has provided them with full opportunity to work together to make Indian Ocean a ‘Zone of Peace’ as well as South Asia a safe and prosperous region.

The research is based on primary as well as secondary sources. Original documents have been collected from Sri Lankan High Commission in India, Ministry of External Affairs, India and National Archives of India. Personal meetings with Mr. J.N. Dixit, National Security Advisor and Mrs. Dhammika Samasinghe, Second Secretary to Press and Culture Sri Lankan High Commission, India, have been a great source of authentic informations. Besides, unpublished dissertations have also been scanned and analysed. However, empirical and inductive approaches have also been adopted.