Chapter - IV

INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS SRI LANKA
SRI LANKA

India's ties with Sri Lanka are deeply rooted in history. Jawaharlal Nehru visited Sri Lanka twice before India's independence. He first went there in 1931 and then in 1939. This reflects close Indian ties with Sri Lanka. In 1946, Indian National Congress gave serious attention to the solution of the problem of the Tamils of Indian origin in Sri Lanka and expressed its views in the following words:

Our working committee have viewed with anxious concern the development of the situation in Ceylone relating to the rights and security and welfare of Indians in Ceylone and more particularly of labour in the rubber and tea estates, resulting in a general hartal of Indian workers which has already lasted over three weeks. The Committee sympathise with the demands of Indians for fair treatment and rights of citizenship and franchise and deeply regret that any such conflict should arise between the Indian residents of Ceylone and the Ceylone Government. Ceylone and India are and must inevitably desire and endeavour of all concerned to find a way for settling all disputes in a just and equitable manner, honourable to both India and Ceylone and conducive to enlarging the freedom of the people. The Committee, while appreciating the sacrifices of the estate workers in their

1. V.P. Dutt, India's Foreign Policy, op.cit., p.223.
heroic struggle, are of opinion that the present strike, which is substantially political in its motive, though it is related to economic problems affecting Indian labour as a whole, should be discontinued, with a view to creating an atmosphere favourable to conciliation, and therefore advise the Ceylon Indian Congress to call it off. The Committee assure the Ceylon Indian Congress of its full sympathy for the cause of Indians in Ceylon and to that end and for taking necessary steps to obtain redress for their grievances appoint the following committee for investigation of the matters in dispute.

The committee will consists of the President (Jawaharlal Nehru) Shri C. Rajagopalachari, Shri Aryanayakam and Shri Ramachandran.  

The foreign policy of India towards Sri Lanka has been complex since independence. Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya said in an interview with the representative of Ceylon Daily News:

India and Ceylon must have common strategy and common defence resources. It cannot be that Ceylon is in friendship with a group with which India is not in friendship.

Since independence the problem of the stateless Tamils of Indian origin in Sri Lanka has proved to be an irritant.

4. V.P. Dutt, India's Foreign Policy, ob.cit., p.224.
Sri Lanka tried to get membership of the Commonwealth to balance its power with India. Prime Minister Nehru personally sent special message to the Sri Lanka government and publicly repudiated the suggestion that India had designs to interfere with the island's sovereignty and assured Sri Lanka of India's goodwill and peaceful intentions towards her.5

The large population of Tamilians in Sri Lanka was divided almost equally into two main groups.

1. The Ceylonese Tamils and
2. The Indian Tamils

The Ceylonese Tamils had been residing in the island for many centuries. They were availing themselves of all the rights in the commercial, professional, academic and political fields as well as in government services. The Indian Tamils were descendants of migrants brought to Ceylon. These migrants had gone there during the British period. These people were employed as plantation workers in Ceylon. In this way the position of Indian Tamils were naturally weaker as compared with the Ceylon Tamils, particularly from economical and political points of view, the Ceylon Tamils were strong because they had been living there for several centuries and were citizens of Sri Lanka. On the contrary, the Indians Tamils could not get citizenship because they were weak.

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politically and financially. But the important point in this regard is that this class organised a labour Union that yielded considerable influence.

The Government of India felt that Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka should get citizenship and that it was the responsibility of the Government of Sri Lanka to get them assimilated with the rest of her people.

Sri Lanka adopted some legislative measures denying citizenship or voting rights to the majority of Indian Tamils. Nehru visited Sri Lanka on January 14, 1950. He was welcomed by the people of the country and he gave them the assurance that they had no cause to fear that India would swallow up Ceylon. 6

In the years 1953 and 1954 top level meetings were held to solve the problems of Indian Tamils. Finally, an agreement was signed on January 18, 1954 between Sri Lanka and India to expedite the registration of Indian Tamils for citizenship in the light of the 1949 India and Pakistan residents(Citizenship) Act. But this agreement could not be implemented because there emerged another question of a third category of persons who were citizens neither of Sri Lanka nor of India, but were 'stateless' and this issue could not be resolved.

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Right from the time of India's independence, the problem of stateless Tamils of Indian origin in Sri Lanka has proved to be an irritant. This, coupled with the moral support of India to the demand for parity of the Tamilian with the Sinhali, as regarded the civic and political rights raised by the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), an organisation representing the Tamils of the northern and eastern Tamil majority provinces, created tension between the governments of India and Sri Lanka in the early sixties.

The problem was created by the Sri Lankan government itself which disenfranchised the original immigrants from South India soon after the island's independence, making them stateless. Government of India's efforts to find a political solution to this problem were constantly stymied by Sinhalese intransigence. However, a breakthrough came with the agreement reached on 30 October 1964 between the then Prime Ministers of India Lal Bahadur Shastri and Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike his Sri Lankan counterpart. However, the Tamil problem continued since then to plague India-Sri Lanka relations. Under the pact, India had agreed to confer citizenship on 525,000 stateless Tamilian together with their children and to rehabilitate them in India while Sri Lanka was to absorb 300,000 Tamilians along-with their offspring as its nationals. The agreement thus covered 825,000 families out of an estimated 975,000. The fate

of the remaining 150,000 was to be decided at a later stage. A time frame of 15 years was fixed for completing the process.8

A census which was held in 1966 confirmed the number of stateless persons of Indian origin in Sri Lanka mentioned in Sirimavo - Shastri Agreement.

On 6 December 1966 the Ceylon Prime Minister introduced a bill for the implementation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement in the House of Representatives. After some discussion, the bill was passed and became a law on November 17, 1967. Mrs. Indira Gandhi went to Sri Lanka on 18-22 September 1967 to ratify the Indo-Ceylon Agreement. Some other bilateral matters were also discussed during the visit. In the end of her visit, a joint communique was issued confirming the implementation of the agreement of 1964.

The joint committee formed to carry out the Sri Lanka Agreement met in Colombo on March 4, 1968 to review the progress of its implementation. It reported that already a number of persons had been conferred citizenship and yet another group had been issued Indian Passports and that the process had begun without creating any heart-burning on either side.9

8. V.P. Dutt, India's Foreign Policy, ob.cit., p.225.