CHAPTER VII
INDIA'S ROLE IN DEFFUSING THE ETHNIC
CONFLICT IN SRLANKA

Historically, Srilanka is an integral part of Indian Socio-cultural system. A common colonial experience has further strengthened the bonds between India and Srilanka. Therefore it is very necessary that India's role in Srilankan ethnic conflict ought to be studied in the proper historical perspective. The Indian factor has added to the multi-dimensional character of the ethnic conflict in Srilanka. The major role India has played in this regard is a logical product of two factors. First, successive Srilankan Governments never fulfilled their promises to the Tamil Minority, and it had its repercussions on Indian politics, particularly on that of Tamil Naidu. Therefore, India had to become concerned with the Island's ethnic strife. Secondly, the geopolitical location of Srilanka being what it is, the Srilankan efforts since 1948 to seek help from other countries such as America and Pakistan to strengthen its military power caused strains in the bilateral relations between Srilanka and India. It was against this background Indian policy-makers

proclaimed the strategic doctrine that India would not tolerate external intervention in Srilanka if it had any implicit or explicit anti-Indian implications. Any destabilizing development in Srilanka is of much concern for India, for military and strategic reasons. However, India's role in Srilankan affairs has been primarily determined by specific internal and strategic points of view. Its efforts were mainly aimed at ensuring that Srilanka did nothing that was prejudicial to India's security interests. Since, Srilanka became independent the Srilankan Tamils always depended on the cultural and political support of the Tamils in South India, thereby compelling India to act as a guardian of the Tamils in Srilanka. Thirdly, India's role in Srilanka was also influenced by the open and competitive electoral politics in Tamil Nadu. The Indian Government have had to appease and respect the sentiments of the people of Tamil Nadu. India's role in Srilanka, in general, had to accommodate the pressures exerted by the Simhalese, time and again on the question of statelessness of India Tamils in Srilanka and during the ethnic crisis. As a consequence quite often whatever India did or tried to do activated the dominant Simhala Buddhist nationalism and promoted a cohesion of anti-Indian forces because of the fear that Srilanka would come

under India's hegemony. But in reality India has declared repeatedly and in unequivocal terms that it supports fully Srilankan integrity and sovereignty on the question of Tamil Homeland.

In the light of what has been said above India's role in Srilanka can be broadly classified as follows: (a) direct and (b) Indirect.

India's intervention, direct or indirect, by sought by Srilanka whenever the political system of the country was threatened. The indirect role of India since independence has been to assure Srilanka that its attitude towards Srilanka is friendly and conciliatory, and never imperialists. Basically, India's indirect role is based on certain commonly shared precepts and values. Religion for example, has been a significant force in India's conciliatory approach Srilanka. The policy of non-alignment pursued both by India and Srilanka is supported by certain fundamental Hindu and Buddhist values. From 1956 onwards Srilanka has associated itself closely with India in its international affairs. Their shared faith in the five princi-


4. For example, India provided some 50 Million worth of Military assistance to Srilankan Government during 1971 anti-insurgency drive against the J.V.P.

pies of peaceful co-existence and in the concept of Afro-Asian solidarity contributed valuably to the relations of these two countries from 1956 to 1970. During this phase whatever irritants there were between them were sorted out by means of negotiated bilateral settlements. For instance India played a significant role in the issue of Indian minorities and reduced the tension.

INDIA'S INDIRECT ROLE IN SRILANKA

An issue which has constantly strained the relations between India and Sri Lanka is the problem of migrants of Indian origin in Sri Lanka. For India it is not such an important question, but for Sri Lanka it has been a major consideration in framing its domestic policies. From 1948 to 1956 Sri Lanka adopted a policy of political aloofness and very much suspected what was regarded as the delaying attitude of India in solving the issue of Indian immigrants. Thus the UNP government since 1948 passed important legislations affecting the citizenship and immigration of Tamils. These policies were criticised by Jawa-harlal who headed the Indian government.

To offset fears of a possible attack by India the Sri Lankan foreign policy during D.S. Senanayake period primarily aimed

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at developing a close relationship with Great Britain under the banner of commonwealth of Nations.  

The first Srilanka's citizenship law, passed in 1948-49 was unacceptable to the Indian government and it criticised it as discriminatory, against the India Tamils in Srilanka. The Madras provincial government and Assembly debated over this issue and emotionally reacted to it. It pressurised the Government of India, to take a firm stand on this issue. The Srilanka-United Kingdom defence Agreement of 1947 further necessitated India's role. India's role in Srilanka increased on account of three important Acts passed by the Government of Srilanka.

1 The citizenship Act No 18 of 1948 and the Indian and Pakistan citizenship Act No 3 of 1949 which aimed at restricting the Indian Tamils from acquiring Srilankan citizenship.

2 The Ceylon (Parliamentary Elections) amendment Act which was aimed at eliminating Indian Tamil representation in the Srilankan Parliament.

8 Hindustan Times, (New Delhi, 9th February, 1953).
9 The Hindu, Madras 29th November, 1948.

During 1947 six constituencies in the Central provinces where the plantation workers were in majority had returned members belonging to the Ceylon Indian Congress, (Nuwara Eliya, Hatton, Talawakelle, Kotagala, Nawlapitya and Maskellia)
Political opinion in the Legislative Assembly of the then Madras province strongly reacted to these developments and passed many resolutions, which was in the nature of urging the central government to take necessary action. Kalidas Nag, and a few others raised the issue of Indian Tamils in the Rajya Sabha. R Venkatraman, then a Congress M.P from Madras, said that it was an internal problem of Srilanka. A.K Gopalan, a communist member, asked the Indian government to make use of the commonwealth forum as a way to find a peaceful and an acceptable solution. The Madras Legislative Assembly urged the Prime Minister Nehru to solve the problem of Indian Tamils diplomatically in the Commonwealth Foreign Minister’s Conference to be held during January, 1950. Thus, for the first time after independence Srilanka was invited to diplomatic talks at India’s instance.

The first attempt, to settle this very old conflict was the talk held between D S Sananayake the Prime Minister of Srilanka and Prime Minister Nehru. In these talks India expressed readiness to accept those Indian Tamils who were aspiring for Indian citizenship but also added that Srilanka should accept to give citizenship rights for Indian Tamils who had long been.

resident in Srilanka. But the modalities and the cumbersome procedure adopted by both the nations resulted in a statement. The bureaucrats of both countries had been instrumental increasing misunderstandings while executing a realistic solution of the problem.

A second attempt to solve this problem was the talk held between Dudley Senanayke and Nehru in June 1953 in London, when they met during the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. An agreement was reached on principles, along with lesser points of difference in translating the agreed principles into actions. In 1953 when UNP leadership changed, a further talk was held between Nehru and Sir John Kotelawalla and as a result India agreed to take back Indian citizens under the provisions of Article 8 of Indian constitution of 1950 and Srilanka accepted that immigrants of Indian origin who wished to become citizens of Srilanka to be absorbed according to the Srilanka's India and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949.14 Srilanka later eliminated certain respective procedures in these Acts to facilitate the settlements of the issue.

However, the agreement failed and was complicated by the issue of illegal immigration of Tamils into Srilanka. To sort out problems a second round of talks was held between
Kotelwala and Nehru at New Delhi in October 1954, a third change of Government took place in Srilanka in 1956. S W R.D. Bandaranaike the new Prime Minister and Nehru issued a joint statement regarding sorting out the outstanding problems between India and Srilanka. But again it proved futile. However, a most desirable agreement took place between India and Srilanka when Mrs Bandaranaike came to power for the second time in 1962 and signed an agreement of historical importance known as "Sirimavo-Sastri" pact which came into force in October 1964. India agreed to confer citizenship on 5.25 lakh persons with natural increase in their numbers over a period of 15 years. Srilanka agreed to transfer 3,00,000 persons under the agreement. By another agreement in 1974 the Government of India agreed to accept repatriation of a further 75,000 persons with their natural increase. The agreement expired with effect from November 1979, but both Indian and Srilankan Governments agreed to extend the period of its validity for another two years upto 30th October, 1981. However the process of repatriation continued till 1984. While, making a third accord

15. The text of the Joint Statement by the Prime Minister of Ceylon and India issued in Colombo on May 19, 1957.

16 The Hindu, Madras, October 31, 1964

17 The Hindu, Madras, January 27, 1974.

18 Indian Express, Madras, October 31, 1981.
between the Governments of India and Srilanka in January 1986 it was agreed that Srilanka would grant citizenship to an additional 94,000 persons and their natural increase.\(^{19}\)

India's role on the question of "Statelessness" of Indian Tamils in Srilanka had reduced the intensity of the ethnic conflict in Srilanka. India's diplomatic role had made repatriation of 4,59,410 Indian Tamils possible by February 1986. Of these 3,33,843 persons were covered by the bilateral agreements between India and Srilanka and the remaining of 1,25,567 were due to natural increase.\(^{20}\) To repatriate them, the amount spent since 1969 was Rs 51 70 crores.\(^{21}\) Thus, India's role on this question has been entirely determined by the sentimental feelings of the Tamils in South India, and the genuine desire to reduce the magnitude of the forces causing ethnic hostility in Srilanka. India's interest to solve this problem rested on three main factors: (1) the desire of Central Government of India, controlled by the Congress Party, to accommodate the sentiments of the people of Tamil Naadu. (2) Considerable reduction in the 'anti-India posture of the political and religious

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20. Public (Refugee Rehabilitation), Dept of Policy Note on Miscellaneous Relief and Rehabilitation of Indian Overseas and Refugees and Evacuees, Government of Tamil Nadu, Madras, 1986, p.2.

organisations in Sri Lanka since the conclusion of IndoSri-Lankan agreement; and (3) the development of an overall policy of the Sri Lankan government which, since her independence had oscillated between socialist and liberal economy which had adverse effects on Indian trading interests.

INDIA'S DIRECT ROLE

India's direct role in Sri Lanka emerged only slowly, after the 1950's when Sri Lanka's contact with China began to develop. With the Rice-Rubber agreement of 1952 and the Maritime Agreement of 1963, this Island nation gained the most favoured nation-state status with China. Actually, Sri Lanka's China policy was intended to be a balance of power policy directed against India, and it sought to limit what it regarded as the potential military threat from India. However, it was the superpower rivalry in the Indian Ocean which made it necessary for India turn towards Sri Lanka increasingly. India sought to restrict Sri Lanka's involvement with outside powers, because of her own geo-political interests rather than any imperialist or expansionist ambition.

It was the domestic ethnic problem of Sri Lanka, the conflict between the Tamils and Sinhalese which led to India's direct involvement in that country. Efforts made to resolve

the ethnic problem through bilateral agreements in 1964, 1974 and later covered only the Indian Tamils, and not the Srilankan Tamils. Thus the Communal problem of Srilanka had been a long standing one creating problems in Srilanka's relation with India. When the ethnic problem flared up into unprecedented proportions of a real crisis during July 1983, India could not but take a specific interest in the developments in Srilanka. Promptly Srilanka accused India of 'interference' in her domestic affairs. However from the Indian point of view, the big obstacles to restoring good relations with Srilanka were: first, the continued existence of large numbers of Srilankan Tamil refugees in India. second, the continuing stalemate in the negotiations for a political solution of the ethnic problem in Srilanka; and third, Srilanka's attempt to obtain outside military assistance for suppressing the militant Srilankan Tamils. During July 1983 ethnic riots the ruling UNP party, harked back to its pre-1956 stance of anti-Indianism. 23 But the Indian view was that Srilanka was an unstable polity suffering from a crisis of identity, which weakened by fragile political and social systems, could not handle its domestic upheavals without Indian support. It was in such a critical situation that India got prepared to intervene militarily, directly and indirectly, when Indian interests were threatened. 24

India's direct role in the Srilankan ethnic conflict can broadly be divided into two viz., as a mediator and as a guarantor of peace. The mediatory role of India began only in the 1970's though the Simhala-Tamil conflict had been there for more than 40 years. Till then India had not directly involved herself in it. During the Janata Regime, Prime Minister Morarji Desai publicly criticised those Tamils who were demanding a separate state for Tamils. He rejected outright the idea of a fusion of Srilanka with the Indian federal system. During the July 1983 riots and afterwards India's role and direct involvement became extremely important and delicate.

There was far sometime a total lack of dialogue between the Simhalese and the Tamils in Srilanka. The TULF refused to participate in the All Party Conference to discuss the implementation of the District Council Act of 1980. Further ENLF Secretary General K. Eelaventhan maintained that a separate state of Eelam is absolutely necessary for the security of India and in the interest of peace in the Indian Ocean. Leaders of various politics parties in India urged the Central Government to declare that the Tamil problem was no longer an internal

affair of Srilanka. However, instead of taking a military step, India on its part initiated peaceful talks between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in Srilanka. During this period the Srilankan foreign policy became unfriendly towards India and it sought military assistance from the U.S.A., U.K., Pakistan and Bangladesh. Hired mercenaries from Britain and Isreal were invited to fight the Tamil Tigers. Jayawardene even thought of a military solution to combat the Tamil Tigers.

Thus the problem of Srilanka Tamils contributed to the worsening of Indo-Srilanka relations. Violation of human rights in Srilanka compelled India to take mediatary steps between the Sinhalese and Tamil groups. First, G. Parthasarathy was sent by Mrs Gandhi as her envoy to mediate between the Tamil groups and the Srilankan government. His mission was to some extent successful in persuading the Srilankan government to suspend the sixth Amendment to the Srilanka constitution, and the TULF to suspend its demand for a separate Eelam state. This mission assured the Srilankan Tamils a federal set-up for Srilanka with more autonomy for the proposed Tamil Provincial Council. But such Indian proposals were treated with

28. Indian Express, Madras 9, August, 1983.
29. The Times of India, New Delhi, June 24, 1984.
31. The Times of India, New Delhi, 18 August, 1983.
32. The Times of India, New Delhi, 14, September, 1983.
contempt by Jayawardene Parthasarathy made a second visit to Sri Lanka and prevailed upon and the Tamils to accept his proposals. These proposals were to be placed before the All Party Conference and a decision was to be reached on the basis of consensus and finally the approval of the Parliament to be obtained. But due to the indifferent attitudes of the Buddhist Mahasangha and the TULF no concrete solution emerged. Thus India's intervention diplomatically was in vain.

India's third attempt to convene an all party conference through G Parthasarathy was finally successful. Though India's mediation an agreement was reached between Jayawardene, Parthasarathi and Amrithalingam. Unfortunately, the Indian effort of mediation through negotiation was construed as deliberate 'Indian Intervention'. The second All Party Conference meeting was held on 20th March 1984 and certain consensus was reached to solve the ethnic crisis. During the third meeting of the APC, it was agreed to form two committees, one to work on the devolution of power to the DDC and at the APC level, and the other committee to work out steps that had to be taken

33 They included the giving up of the idea of separate Eelam, the merger of Northern and Eastern District Development Councils, a referendum in the district applicable to the whole island, putting the administration of Trincomalee Port under central government.

35 The Statesman, New Delhi, 19, March, 1984

for equalisation in education, employment and exercise of language rights. But the APC was entangled in a deadlock because the Sinhalese political parties unilaterally had arrived at a consensus among themselves on the proposal of the District Council, and more than that, the Tamil groups insisted on the formation of a Regional Council. A proposal by Jayawardene for a Second Chamber was also rejected by all the Tamil Groups. The TULF President Sivasithamparam said that this proposal did not even touch the fringe of the ethnic problem. However, India persuaded the TULF to participate in the APC discussions and to arrive at an amicable solution. At this juncture the SLFP expressed support to the formation of the Provincial Council and it was echoed by the UNP. But the Sri Lankan government, unable to resist the pressure of the Sinhala groups dropped the idea of forming an autonomous provincial council. This was the end of India's mediatory role through the moderate leaders of the Sri Lankan Tamils as well as the Indian Tamils. This led to the decline of the popularity of TULF and consequently the Tamil militants gained an upperhand. The Tamil militants accused the TULF leaders as agents of India acting to safeguard India's security interests. India's mediatory role

38. The Indian Express, Madras, 19 August, 1984.
for a peaceful settlement was thwarted by the Government of Srilanka when it violated a 12 week ceasefire agreement between the Tamil militants and the Srilankan army. Indias' reaction to the ceasefire violation by Srilankan government and to the genocide of the Tamils was not strong enough. Of the two major political parties in Tamil Nadu, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Khazhagam politicized the issue to make a political gain out of it, and Karunanidhi of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam exerted pressure on the Government of India for a direct military intervention in Srilanka.

However Prime Minister Mrs Gandhi, rejected the Seiam demand as well as the demand for military action against Srilanka. But, now an India's policy became one of extending support to the Tamil Militant's strategy as a way to harass Colombo to the extent of forcing it to reach an agreement acceptable to India. From July 1983 to 31, October, 1984, Indira Gandhi's reluctance to discourage the Tamil Militants was a major irritant in Indo-Srilankan relations.

The Indian Government's sympathetic gesture towards the Srilankan Tamils changed when Rajiv Gandhi became the


Prime Minister Two of India government's actions during his time gained the confidence of the Sri Lankan government. First, Romesh Bhandari replaced G. Parthasarathy and second, the government of India within a week arrested the free movement of Tamil militants in Tamil Nadu. Bhandari's mission to Sri Lanka resulted in a fresh round of negotiations towards a political solution to the ethnic problem. A summit meeting was arranged between Rajiv Gandhi and Jayawardene and it produced some positive results. As a result of this meeting, India assumed a new role as peace maker. India succeeded in arranging for a cease-fire a second time, to enable direct talks between the Tamil groups and Sri Lankan government. Thimpu, the capital of the Bhutan was the venue for the talks. The first round of talks were held in July 8-13, 1985, and the second talks were held in August 12-17, 1985. But unfortunately the Thimpu talks failed. In such a situation India naturally became as mediator much more involved in the resolution of the issue.

44. Being a Tamil, Parthasarathy had not gained the confidence of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Government publicly reported that he is more biased and sympathetic to the cause of Tamils.


47. The moderate Tamil group TULF and the following Tamil militant groups represented during the Thimpu talk, LTTE, EELRLF, EROS, TELO.

It began to give a balanced support to Sri Lanka, playing off the Moderate Tamil United Liberation Front against the militants, and one militant group against the other. In Sri Lanka, the government instead of finding a peaceful solution to the problem appeared to prefer military action against the Tamil militants. Military pressure was exercised against the Tamils. But in late 1986, the Tamil militants successfully checked the advancement of the Sri Lankan army forces and made it feel helpless of the Sri Lankan army forces and made it feel. At this juncture India exerted pressure on the LTTE to have a negotiated settlement and made yet another bid to find a political solution for the ethnic problem. An Indian delegation led by P Chidambaram, succeeded in committing the Sri Lankan Government to the Principle of a provincial council as the basic unit of devolution. Some differences of opinion on key issues between the militant Tamils and the Sri Lankan government were narrowed down, and by a sustained effort was made by the Indian government to restrain the Tamil militants from endangering the negotiation process. But by the end of November 1986 the proposal was rejected by the Tamil militants. There was hectic activity between India and Sri Lanka during the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) summit, which was held in Bangalore in December, 1986 India’s mediation efforts in the aftermath of the SAARC summit were led by Natwar Singh and

50. Frontline, Madras, November, 16, 1986
P Chidambaram They sought a middle ground between the Tamil insistence on the merger of Northern and Eastern provinces and Sinhalese opposition to it. Because of their efforts, a consensus between India and Srilanka was arrived at. In this "December 19 proposals" Srilanka agreed to separate the Sinhalese speaking electorate of Ampari from the Eastern province.

By January, 1987 the Srilankan ethnic conflict had deteriorated into a precarious situation because the Srilankan government never took serious steps to implement the December 19th proposals. As a consequence, the LTTE took over the civil administration in Jaffna and simultaneously the Srilankan government stepped up military action both in the North and East of Srilanka which resulted in the killing of 200 Tamil civilians particularly in the Mannar and other northern towns. India expressed its deep concern over these developments, especially the Human Rights violations and the economic blockade of Jaffna. India also condemned the Military offensive by Srilankan government against the Tamil Militants which caused extensive civil casualties. India expressed its intention to help the victims of Srilankan army action by providing relief supplies to them but it was rejected by the Srilankan government. But India

was determined on this humanitarian service. As a result, the Indian Airforce entered the Srilankan air space and air dropped relief supplies in Jaffna. Thus Srilanka was forced to lift the economic blockade of Jaffna and cease for the time being military operations. The politico-military-strength of India and the refusal of major foreign powers to come to its rescue made Srilanka to return to negotiations for a political settlement of the Tamil problem. Following renewed diplomatic activity between India and Srilanka, Rajiv Gandhi and Jayawardene signed an agreement on July 29, 1987 in Colombo for ending the ethnic conflict. For the enforcement of the military aspect of the accord Indian troops, the IPKF, landed in Srilanka.

The agreement however was not well received either by the LTTE or by the opposition parties of Srilanka. Inspite of such opposition, the Accord was finally accepted half way through and implemented. The U.S.A government welcomed this agreement and E.E.C member countries extended their

55 It is popularly referred as Operation Poomala, The Hindu, Madras, June, 1987.
57 Indian Express, New Delhi, 30 July, 1987.
58 Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher letter to Rajiv Gandhi, Former Prime Minister on 6-8-1987.
support for such peaceful settlements. Since 1983, India had been playing the role of a mediator between the Tamil Eelam groups and the Sri Lankan government. During these years India tried her best to persuade the two parties to narrow down their differences and misunderstandings and to make them work for a peaceful political settlement. From July 29, 1987 onwards India’s role as mediator changed. India’s role changed from that of a promoter to that of a party to the settlement. 59

India involvement in Sri Lankan ethnic conflict became far more direct than even before. As a result the dormant Sinhala Buddhist nationalism became activated and anti-Indian forces were promoted. Further, the absence of any effort by India to restrain the activities of the Tamil militants of Sri Lanka in South India also added to the already virulent anti-Tamil and anti-India feeling among the Sinhalese. A major weakness of the Indian diplomacy has been its lack of enough leverage with the rival parties in the ethnic conflict. India never succeeded in persuading the Tamil groups except the TULF. In the ultimate analysis India’s mediation did not bear first either in bringing about a political settlement of the Sinhalese Tamil conflict, or in bringing down the ethnic tensions. However, the Indo-Sri Lankan accord could reaffirm India’s important role in safeguarding the security of South Asian countries.