



ETHNIC PROBLEM AS A FACTOR IN INDO-SERILANKA RELATIONS

Dr.Paramjit Kaur

*Head of Dept. Political Science
Guru Nanak College, Batala,
GNDU, Amritsar, Panjab, India*

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The international relations in the present age has become more complex because of the fact that conflictual behaviour among the nations has become more common than the cooperative one. Friendly relations, more especially among neighbour, help to promote the prosperity of the nations. However, relations among nations are often complex and are influenced

by a variety of factors like geopolitical, historical, racial, religious, Ideological and strategic etc.

Pakistan, China, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Burma and Sri Lanka (Ceylon) are India's close neighbours. Relations with those countries assume special importance for India by virtue of their location. Sri Lanka is nearer to India because of strategic, political and historical factors. Geographically, it is a close neighbour of India, separated by a narrow strip of waters the 'Palk strait' situated at a distance of a few miles. By seeing the map of India, Sri Lanka appears like a 'geographical child' of India. A romantic poet imagines that Sri Lanka change to the foot of "Mother India" and a painter observes that Sri Lankan is a "locket in the chain" of India.

Relations with this country is, therefore of considerable importance. A number of common approaches and determinants govern the relations between the two countries. They are also closely linked with socio-cultural and religious ties.



Introduction

Both India and Sri Lanka emerged as sovereign, independent countries on the firmament of the world map almost at the same time. As both the countries are nonaligned and believe in the peaceful settlement of all bilateral issues, there had been no major irritant between them. They have always adopted the identical approach towards many international issues including the problem of peace, world cooperation, imperialism, disarmament and apartheid policy. However, a few problems like that of the smuggling, illicit immigration, the issue of deficit trade balance in Sri Lanka and the ethnic issue have marred their mutual understanding and cordiality. Instead of going to war propaganda techniques initially they had preferred to solve their problems across the table.

“In the Constitution of May 1972, Ceylon - the earlier name of the land - was changed to Sri Lanka.

However, it is the crux of the problem of Indian Tamils settled in Sri Lanka Which has bedevilled the relations between India and Sri Lanka since long. It has become a burning problem recently between the two neighbours. Despite mutual links extending over centuries, India and Sri Lanka had always been embroiled on the issue of the people of the Indian origin in Sri Lanka (Tamilian) who, at present, constitute about 20 % of the island's total population. The Tamils feel themselves discriminated at the hands of Sri Lanka government, the humiliation and ill-treatment led them to stand in revolt against their government. However, the government of India has never intervened in the affairs of Sri Lanka and it has often remained passive towards the problem of the Tamilians considering it as an internal affair of Sri Lanka. But the Indian residing in the state of Tamil Nadu have always expressed their strong resentment against the atrocities being committed on the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Their attitude towards and perception of the problem had been a little divergent from that of the Indian government. Whatever, impact it may have had, it has never been Rightly understood because of the emotional nature of the issues. It is, however, on record that the government of India has neither encouraged nor instigated the Tamilians against the government of Sri Lanka.

The vexed Tamil issue has its roots in the past, when both the countries were under the domination of a colonial power. The British masters for their own economic gains sent a large number of Indian workers from south India to Sri Lanka. These Tamils live sandwiched between the Sinhalese's and the other communities in the Central highlands of Sri Lanka. They did not sever their relations with their brethren living in South India, rather they tried to preserve their culture and identity. The Sinhalese which is a majority and dominating community in Sri Lanka feels a challenge from the Tamils, who had attended economic prosperity in Sri Lanka. Once the Sinhalese pleaded that the Tamilians are not the citizens of Sri Lanka and they should be sent back. But it is not feasible to implement this demand which has wide-scale repercussions. The people of Indian Origin after settling in Sri Lanka had toiled and laboured hard and contributed to the development and prosperity of that country for about two centuries. But they led a life of



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slaves and suffered discrimination in each and every filed of life, they were denied civil and political rights which the citizen of Sri Lanka enjoyed. It was because of the prejudice of the Sinhalese towards the Tamils that complicated the problems more.

The common to Sri Lanka and India since their independence have made several efforts to accomplish a peaceful solution of this issue. In the process the Indian and Sri Lankan government have concluded many pacts (Nehru-Kotela-wala Pact of 1954, Bandaranaike - Shastri Pact of 1964 and Indira Gandhi - Bandaranaike agreement of 1974) to solve the issue but even these proved to be a failure to resolve the tangle. Besides the curse of statelessness once, there are other consequences of the crisis which were the outcome of various civil, political and linguistic riots. In the wake of the 1956 elections, which heralded a Sinhalese-Buddhist resurgence Sinhalese-Tamil clashes erupted in the same year which was further followed by communal outburst in 1958, 1961, 1977, 1981 and 1983. Large-scale massacre of the Tamils in these riots evoked public sympathy in India. Sri Lanka's relations with India were consequently adversely affected. The Indian factor in the ethnic politics of Sri Lanka has not only sharpened politico-economic contradictions in the republic's polity but has also severely strained the traditionally cordial bilateral relationship. Thus, the relations between the two countries became tense.

Recently this issue has become braver and it is a very crucial factor in the mutual relations between the two countries. Many attempts had been made to solve the problem recently also, but nothing had come out. The ethnic problem still remains unsolved and has created bad blood between the two countries.

The aim of this paper is to identify various internal and external factors which are hindering the process of settlement of the ethnic crisis. As this issue has been a bone of contention between the countries since independence, it is the need of the time to make a micro level study of the problem. Moreover, since India is involved in helping the Sri Lankan government to find out the solution of the problem, it is significant to undertake the research in the area.

The topic selected for the present study is related to current problem, hence a plethora of literature is coming recently. Some of the relevant books and large number of articles in various journals concerning Indo- Sri Lanka relations and the ethnic problem have been consulted like **Urmila Phadnis**'s Religion and politics in Sri Lanka, **M.S Rajan**'s India in world affairs (1954-56), **S.U Kodikara**'s Indo- Ceylon relations since independence, **D.M.prasad**'s Ceylon's foreign policy under the Bandaranaike 1956-1965: A political analysis, **S.U . Kodikara**'s foreign policy of Sri Lanka: A third world perspective, **M .Howard wriggings**'s Ceylon dilemmas of a new nation, **S.S Bindra**'s India and her neighbours : A study of political economic and cultural relations and interactions, **tonne fries & Thomas Bibin**'s, ed., The undesirables, **Hara prasad Chattopadhyaya**'s Indians in Sri Lanka : a historical survey.

Along with the books, a large number of research articles in various journals and periodicals have also been studied. The most comprehensive and analytical are like **D.M Prasad**'s " Indo- Sri Lanka relations: mutual problems and common approaches" in **Surendra Chopra**, ed., Studies in India foreign policy 1983, **Salamat Ali**'s " Indira's helping hand ", Far Eastern economic review, vol.21,1983. **M.V Desai**'s " where interest of India and Sri Lanka



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converge ", commerce, vol.147 , 1983 , **Robert N. Kearney's** " language and the rise of separation in Sri Lanka", Asian survey ,vol.18 ,may 1979, **Urmila Phadnis's** " the 1964 Indo-Ceylonese pact and the ' stateless' persons in Ceylon", India quarterly. Vol.23, October., December 1967 and **Lalit Kumar's** " The Sirimavo- shastri pact of 1964 and problems and prospects of implementation ", India quarterly, vol.31,july- September 1975 , and R.S Gautam 's " Indo - Sri Lanka relations", a working paper presented at the 43rd annual conference of India political science association.

Although these books and articles and many others throw some light on different aspects of the problem, yet no one has analysed the Tamil problem from different angles. In this paper an attempt has been made to fill the vacuum existing in the present literature. Ethnic problem has been studied not only from racial, but also from political, economic, social and religious angles. An effort has been made to study and analyse the Tamil problem objectively and in detail that will help to fill the gap.

In this paper the following research questions have been examined:

1. what are causes for the present frustration of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka?
2. what are the factors which hindered the implementation of the facts?
3. Is the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis inexorably moving towards a flash point which brings Indo-Sri Lanka relations to a dead end?
4. how for India could be helpful to Sri Lanka in solving this problem?
5. what are the means adopted by the India and Sri Lanka to solve the Tamil issue and how far are these successful?
6. to the recent events contain the potential of embittering relations to such an extent that India may come under increasing pressure to intervene directly?
7. why is this problem still lingering on?

Sri Lanka like the other democratic countries and plural societies of the world comprised the population having different ethnic, linguistic and religious loyalties in its heart. The religious communities are Buddhist, Hindu Muslim and Christian, amongst which the first is numerically the largest. The population of the country is predominately Buddhist and they have a prominent place in the national field.ⁱ Buddhist religious system in the islandⁱⁱ with the pluralistic overtones of its value system and structure also made it, in certain respects, congruent with the pluralist structures of democracy.ⁱⁱⁱ The other communities also struggle to achieve the goal in all respects and effects the policies and programmes framed by the government of Sri Lanka.^{iv} The Government of Sri Lanka faced problems because of the complex social set up.

Sri Lankan society has multi-religious, multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic nature^v in which each group appears to be separated by such a sense of quasi-racial, quasi-species cleavage overarching over the language cleavage.^{vi}

The roots of ethnic violence between majority Sinhalese community and minority Tamils can be traced back in the past when India and Sri Lanka were under the colonial rule. The forefathers of Tamilians had gone from India To Sri Lanka in the 19th Century.^{vii} They carried their language, culture and tradition to Sri Lanka. The Tamils still maintain social link with their more numerous Tamils brethren living in South India. But the Sinhalese though racially and



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culturally skin to North Indians, are very much conscious of their separate identity.^{viii} The Sinhalese complain that Ceylon and Indian Tamils have a disproportionate share of jobs in public and private sectors in comparison to their percentage of population with Sinhalese. Both remain suspicious of each other.^{ix} The Tamils feel that they may be swamped by the Sinhalese and this is perceived by the Tamilians as a potential threat to their existence.

One of the most striking features of the ethnic relation in Sri Lanka is that members of each of these communities are apt to see themselves as an oppressed minority. That seems at first sight startling in this case of the Sinhalese, who after all constitute nearly three quarters of the population. But "the Tamils" are not confined to the 2.7 million in the Island: these are seen as forming only an advance guard of the 50 million or so Tamils in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, just a few miles across the Palk Strait. The Tamils are themselves as persecuted by the Sinhalese and oppressed by a government dominated by Sinhalese, dependent for its survival on the Sinhalese votes and therefore concerned only with Sinhalese interests. Even well-educated Tamils speak seriously of a concerted plan of "Genocide" against them.^x The Sinhalese feels that since the Tamilians are not the citizens of Sri Lanka hence they should be sent back. Therefore, people of Indian origin settled there, have not got a fair treatment from the Sinhalese. The Tamils since constitute the largest minority of Sri Lanka, they should be assured that their language, religion and culture would be given due protection and equal opportunities would be afforded to them in sharing the "National cake". But they faced discrimination.^{xi}

By 1975, being further alienated due to the policies of the United federal like the educational policy of standardization, the Tamils United liberation front passed a resolution in which they stressed their demand for Tamil Eelam based on the right of self-determination.^{xii} The firm call for a separate Tamils Eelam was first given on 22 May 1975 by the then Tamils leader Chelvanayagam. He proclaimed the aim of a separate Tamil Eelam comprising six Northern and North Eastern districts.^{xiii}

The TULF at its national convention held at Pannakam on 14 May 1976, unanimously passed a resolution calling for establishment of separate Tamils Eelam.^{xiv} The movement came into being on 26 June 1976 (when over 450 members discussed the problem).^{xv}

Consequently, TULF fought parliamentary general elections of 1977 under the banner of Tamil United liberation front, on Eelam plank advocating the establishment of a sovereign state for the Sri Lanka Tamils.^{xvi} The Tamils United liberation front's 1977 campaign illustrated that separation was a cry raised by the Tamil leadership on the one hand to stress upon the Sinhalese dominated government and get a better deal for the Tamil speaking people and on the other to keep the problem of inequalities, class barriers, and caste discrimination among the Tamils themselves beneath the surface.^{xvii}

The Tamils are working from then onwards the goal of achieving regional autonomy.^{xviii} The Tamils Eelam has become the battle cry for Tamils of Sri Lanka.^{xix} The struggle was carried out not only within the country but also outside.^{xx} In June 1977, the TULF distributed literature advocating a separate state for the Tamils about 500 delegates assembled in Colombo for the non-aligned bureau meeting.^{xxi} The leader of the TULF youth movement, Kasi Anandan, publicly stated that every effort has been made to explain the Tamils' grievances to the



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international public. According to him, the TULF has considerable sympathy in foreign countries where the Tamils' plight has been spotlighted.^{xxii} On this visit to India in March 1979, Amirthalingam appealed to the Indian government and in particular to the people of Tamil Nadu to support the cause of the Sri Lankan Tamils for a separate state.^{xxiii}

Later, some youth associated with the Tamil liberation movement sought asylum abroad, claiming to be refugees fleeing the Island from the alleged harassment by the police. Some of them have called at the embassies of some European countries carrying recommendations from Amirthalingam.^{xxiv} This move undoubtedly was directed at arousing public opinion in foreign countries regarding the plight of the Tamils. Subsequently in May 1979, President of the TULF, Sivasittemparam visited the USA to win support for a separate Tamil state and met congressmen and others, championing the cause of human rights in Sri Lanka. As a result of these campaigns the Massachusetts house of representatives adopted a resolution Urging the president and the Congress of U.S "to protest and utilize the considerable influence and power of their offices to rectify the gross injustices which have been inhumanly inflicted on the Tamils of Sri Lanka".^{xxv}

In the middle of 1982, when 3,00,000 Tamils in Sri Lanka were eluded from citizenship, tension mounted again^{xxvi} with sporadic incidents of violence in 1982 and early 1983. The biggest and the most intense of the ethnic riots broke out in the year 1983.^{xxvii} Since Sri Lanka's government failed to solve the Tamil problem, hence tension increased day by day. In July 1983 the ethnic violence reached the apex. Sinhalese hardliners and Tamil separatists led to threaten Sri Lanka's National integrity.^{xxviii} Since 1983 the ethnic violence has become a way of life in Sri Lanka. The last week of July 1983 saw the peaceful calm of Sri Lanka shattered by a wave of ethnic rioting.^{xxix}

The Problem over the years has become more complex and wide-scale. The Large -Scale violence in Sri Lanka has caused an anxiety and concern not only in Tamil Nadu but also in the whole of India. Although the government of India have always considered this issue as an internal problem of Sri Lanka and did not try to involve herself in it, yet the Indian leadership could not remain a silent spectator. Hence the government of India has expressed her concern from time to time and offered to give suitable and friendly advice. It had actually mediated a number of times to solve this ethnic crisis.

It can be concluded that behind the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka lies a tragic tale of citizenship rights, protection of linguistic-racial rights, struggle for attainment of political and economic rights and religious rights of the Tamils which had bedevilled the island's post-independence history.^{xxx} What has made the situation more grave is the misperception of the crises by both the sides. The misunderstanding of the situation is the result of inbuilt bias that has led it towards deterioration rather than improvement. Both the parties have built their own logic and they are ignoring the national interest of the country as a result, the ethnic problem as become very much crucial and is responsible for the deep-rooted national crisis which eludes solution.



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- ^v Swaroop Rani Dubey, “ Trends and issues in contemporary politics of Sri Lanka”, South Asian Studies, Vol. 12, 1 & 2 January-June and July- December 1977, p.87.
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- ^{vii} R.S Gautam, “Indo-Sri lanka Relations”, A working paper for 43rd Annual Conference of Indian political Science Association, 1984, p.9.
- ^{viii} B.H Farmer Ceylon- A Divided Nation, London, 1963, p.7. Tamils migrated from Gujrat, Bengal and Orissa and their Sinhalese language bears affinity to modern Indian Languages like Hindi, Bengali and Marathi.
- ^{ix} W.H Wriggins, “Implements to unity in New Nation: The case of Ceylon”, American Political Science Review, Vol.55, June 1961, p.316. The Extremists among both the communities believe that they are “subject to a continuous threat of extermination by the Tamils of south India for whom the Tamil communities of Ceylon would act as Trojan Horse” Se in Philip Mason, ed., India and Ceylon: Unity a Diversity, London, 1957, p.274.
- ^x Paul Sieghart, Sri Lanka: A mounting Tragedy of errors, (Report of a mission to Sri Lanka in January 1984 on behalf of the International commission of jurists and its British section, justice), London, March 1984, p.11.
- ^{xi} D.M.Prasad, “Indo- Sri Lanka Relations : Mutual Problems and common Approaches”, In Surrendra Chopra, ed., Studies in India’s Foreign Policy, Amritsar, 1980,p.381.



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^{xii} Lucy M. Jacob, n.36, p.181.

^{xiii} R.S. Gautam, n.12, p.10, Also see Asian Recorder, n.37, p.17368.

^{xiv} W.I Siriweera, “Recent Development in Sinhala Tamil Relation”, Asian Survey, vol.20, September 1980, p.903

^{xv} Swaroop Rani Dubey, n.6, p.89. Ceylon Daily Mirror, 1 December 1976.

^{xvi} A.G Noorani, n.39, p.66.

^{xvii} W.I.Siriweera, n.57, p.904.

^{xviii} W.I.Siriweera, n.57, p.906

^{xix} “Sri Lanka: Sinhala Vs Tamil”, Democratic World, vol.11, 28 November 1982, p.8.

^{xx} W.I.Siriweera, n.57, p.906

^{xxi} Ceylon Daily News, 11 June 1979.

^{xxii} W.I.Siriweera, n.57, p.906

^{xxiii} Ceylon Daily Mirror, 16 March 1979 and The sun, 30 March 1979.

^{xxiv} Ceylon Daily Mirror, 25 April 1979.

^{xxv} Ceylon Daily News, 18 & 30 May 1979.

^{xxvi} The Statesman, 30 October 1982.

^{xxvii} Biswaroop Das, n.34, p.15

^{xxviii} R.S. Gautam, n.12, p.12

^{xxix} Government of Sri Lanka, n.63.

^{xxx} Lan Goonetilleke, “July 1983 and the National Question of Sri Lanka”, in Sri Lanka: The Ethnic conflict, myths, Realities and perspectives, ed., by committee for rational development, New Delhi, 1984, p.245. Due to this, the situation has reached in the words of Bertrand Russell of “fascinating fools and Muzzling the intelligent by emotional excesses on the one hand and terrorism on the other”.