



Indian Prime Minister's Visit to Sri Lanka (11-12 May 2017)

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Indian Prime Minister (PM) Mr. Narendra Modi's visit to Sri Lanka to attend the UN International Vesak Day celebrations as well as to address the up-country Indian origin Tamils was an important step in advancing bilateral relations. This is his second visit to Sri Lanka in a span of three years. In March 2015, the PM visited the conflict affected Northern Province home to majority Sri Lankan Tamils. The current visit took place in the background two important events. South Asia Satellite was launched by India for better cooperation among South Asian countries which is proposed to uplift the economic and social conditions of people. Sri Lanka is one among the South Asian states that supported and welcomed the initiative overwhelmingly. Sri Lanka hailed the launching of South Asia Satellite on 5th May. The President of Sri Lanka said that "it is a historic milestone to accomplish progress on cooperation and development among SAARC countries".¹

Secondly, this visit took place in the background of recent protests Sri Lanka witnessed on proposed Indian investments in the country. Significant sections of Sinhala community are wary of Indian investments in the country for various reasons such as the competitive political environment in Sri Lanka that mobilised public opinion against foreign investments; the history of relations between India and Sri Lanka based on internal conflict; and general not so positive and threat perception towards India shared by majority population driven by the cultural and religious linkages the minority Tamil community share with the ethnic kin across the border in Indian State of Tamil Nadu. Therefore, the visit was an important step in connecting with majority community and to assuage their fears about India-Sri Lanka bilateral cooperation.

The address by the Indian PM on UN Vesak Day was centred on religious and cultural linkages between India and Sri Lanka based on Buddhism. While stressing on "limitless possibilities of shared future" between the two countries, PM informed that India "will continue to invest in positive change and economic growth to deepen development cooperation, trade and investment".² While noting that 'India's development cooperation with Sri Lanka amounts to US

\$2.6 billion, the PM of India said that the main aim of development cooperation is to secure peaceful, secure and prosperous future for Sri Lankan people'.³ The end of war with the LTTE in 2009, paved the way for more substantial economic and development cooperation by India in Sri Lanka. And at present the development partnership “stretches across nearly every sector such as agriculture, education, health, resettlement, transport, power, culture, water, shelter, sports and human resources”.⁴ During the visit the Indian PM announced a direct flight between Varanasi and Colombo from August 2017 and inaugurated a new 150-bed hospital complex in Dickoya, constructed with Indian assistance.



Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dickoya>

While addressing the Up-country Tamils/Indian Origin Tamils also called estate Tamils/workers, the PM recalled the significant contribution the community made towards developing Sri Lankan economy. He said that it is their work which is instrumental in meeting the demands of “almost 17% world’s demand for tea” and earning more than US \$ 1.5 billion in foreign exchange for Sri Lanka. As part of development cooperation, India is constructing 4000 houses in the Central Province. And for the first time, “beneficiaries are entitled to ownership of the land on which the houses are being built”.⁵ During the visit the PM announced additional 10,000 houses in upcountry areas.

Up-country Tamil Issues and Responses

Up-country Tamils were brought to the island during colonial rule from India to work in tea plantations to meet the additional demand for tea production. After independence, the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 tried to restrict granting of citizenship rights to Up-country Tamils. The Act proposed that citizenship will be granted on the basis of descent and registration. For both procedures the tedious documentary proof that was required, disqualified many Indian Tamils who were illiterate. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) as well as Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) asked the Indian Origin Tamils not to register in protest. Due to the Act 'nearly a million estate workers of Indian origin have become stateless after independence'.⁶

In later years the issue was addressed through agreements reached between India and Sri Lankan governments. The Sirimavo-Shastri Pact of 1964, the Sirimavo-Indira Pact of 1974 as well as Grant of Citizenship Act passed in 1988 by the Sri Lankan government settled Up-country Tamil problems of citizenship and repatriation. Unlike the 'previous citizenship laws, the 1988 Act gave all Up-country Tamils citizenship with legislative fiat and no conditions attached'.⁷

The CWC had represented the community for many years. The leader of CWC Mr. Saumiyamurthy Thondaman spoke for the rights of the community and had aligned with the Sinhala political parties, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United Nations Party (UNP) to get maximum economic and social benefits to the workers. He served as Member of Parliament and as a Cabinet minister. Some argue that the lack of support for Up-country Tamils from the Sri Lankan Tamil leadership, after independence in their struggle for citizenship and other rights alienated the community from Sri Lankan Tamils. For example, 'the pact signed by S.J.V. Chelvanakam and the PM of Sri Lanka S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (S -C Pact) dropped the issue of citizenship to estate workers in 1964 under pressure from Sri Lankan state'.⁸

The class and caste differences also played a part in alienating Up-country Tamils from Sri Lankan Tamils, who were educated and had occupied important positions in society due to the colonial education system. And importantly, 'Up-country Tamils areas were not part of "Tamil Homeland" as envisaged by some of the Sri Lankan Tamil parties and militant groups in the past. This approach dissuaded the Sri Lankan Tamil leadership from genuinely pursuing the rights of Up-country Tamils'.⁹ The presence of large number of Indian origin workers was also seen as a threat to the identity and dominance of Sinhala community in Up-country areas. Granting of citizenship rights to Up-country Tamils by Sri Lankan State was a calculated move as it helped the then UNP government led by Ranasinghe Premadasa to win presidential elections and consolidate his power in 1988.

Despite the somewhat cordial association maintained by the community with the Sri Lankan state, right to shelter, education, health and better wages are some of the issues the community has been facing for long. In this context, India and Sri Lankan governments are cooperating to improve the living condition of the plantation workers in the education sector. The 'Ceylon Estate Workers Education Trust (CEWET) is already in place which was set up in 1947. The Trust is providing around 700 scholarships annually to students to study in Sri Lanka and India'.¹⁰ In December 2016, the Government of Sri Lanka 'decided to provide a seven perches

of land for each one living in the Up-country area within the next two years'.¹¹ The Sri Lankan PM Mr. Ranil Wickramasinghe in this regard said that, "receiving the support from India for this initiative shows the cultural, economic, democratic and political relationship between the two countries".¹² According to some 'Sri Lankan government's decision to provide land is a belated but an important step to address the landlessness of the community'.¹³

Response to the visit

Besides addressing plantation workers, a meeting took place between the Indian PM and the 'former President of Sri Lanka Mr. Rajapaksa in Colombo and both the leaders discussed India-Lanka cooperation over the years'.¹⁴ According to reports Mr. Rajapaksa himself requested for a meeting with the Indian PM. After the meeting Mr. Rajapaksa tweeted, "as always, a cordial meeting with PM Narendra Modi and happy to see him in Sri Lanka for International Vesak Day Celebrations". Before the visit Rajapaksa said that 'he is opposed to signing economic agreements with India'.¹⁵ In May Day rally organised by the Joint Opposition (JP) on 1st May, the leaders had called for a black flag protest. The Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena strongly objected to the call by the JP saying "are they Buddhists". Even though the planned protest did not take place during the visit, 'President Sirisena questioned the double standards of the former President, who opposed the visit'.¹⁶ During the meeting with the Indian PM the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leadership conveyed their expectations from the Sri Lankan government that is "meaningful power sharing in a merged North-East".¹⁷ Overall, the Sri Lankan main political parties the UNP, SLFP and TNA welcomed the visit and appreciated the announcements made with regard to housing, connectivity and health services.

However, there are few critical voices which questioned the intention of India and the speech made by the Indian PM during the visit. The Pivithuru Hela Urumaya (PHU) made a statement that, "the Indian PM's speech confirms that India has turned Sri Lanka into one of its semi-colonies".¹⁸ The PHU leadership questioned 'PMs right to make decisions on behalf of Sri Lanka regarding the Indian-funded ambulance service to cover the entire country and build 10,000 housing units for residents in the estate sector'.¹⁹ Another group, the National University Teachers Association (NUTA) issued a statement that, "core of PM Modi's statement based only for the upcountry Tamil factions and not focused on other Tamil communities in the country".²⁰ The General Secretary of NUTA said that, "Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims in the country suffered due to the terrorism that was created and backed by Indian politics and secret services. Therefore it is our responsibility not to repeat the past mistakes in future".²¹

Conclusion

Sri Lanka is trying to come out of the impact of internal conflict that lasted for nearly three decades. Achieving reconciliation, as the internal developments indicate, is going to take considerable time. The conflicting voices which are emerging from Sri Lanka society on the nature of the State, devolution of powers, human rights and accountability issues in the last three years is an important indication that basic differences still remain. The three important ethnic communities of Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils including Tamil speaking Muslim community and Indian origin Up-country Tamils have varying expectations from the State and

they have tried to influence the State through various means to fulfil their demands. It included, peaceful protests, negotiations as well as through violent means. The State also responded, since independence, to various demands of ethnic communities using methods such as talks, international mediation and facilitation, Constitutional amendments as well as military means.

The UN has given two years time to Sri Lanka to work on reconciliation. In the process, adoption of new Constitution which can guarantee equal protection to all the communities in terms of their political, economic and cultural rights can be a positive step. In parallel to Constitution drafting, accountability issues need urgent attention as expected by the war affected population. On the reconciliation front Sri Lankan cabinet approved the National Reconciliation Policy (NRP) on 2nd May 2017. The policy was drafted by the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR), headed by the former President of Sri Lanka, Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. The policy was prepared after wide consultations with multiple stakeholders such as government officials, members of provincial councils, civil society, academia and grass root activists. And this was the “first ever NRP approved by Sri Lanka”.²² The policy will provide guidelines and overall direction to planning and national reconciliation to policy makers.

The Indian PM met the ethnic communities mentioned above in his two visits to Sri Lanka. Even though the focus was on development cooperation, possible economic collaboration and cultural linkages, implementation of policy decisions in this regard is not easy as ethnic communities in Sri Lanka represent different aspirations, interests, needs and beliefs. Successive Sri Lankan government’s failure to address the same led to thirty years of conflict and the country is in a deep debt trap. For example, ‘according to Central bank of Sri Lanka, total external debt position of Sri Lanka in 2016 was US \$ 46,586 million’.²³

All the three communities expect India to play a particular role, based on their community’s needs. And the role, each community is expecting India to play may not be acceptable to other community. For example, the TNA expects India to persuade the Sri Lankan government to merge the northern and eastern provinces through constitutional means and want India to convey that the Constitution drafting should be done in a speedy manner. On the other hand, the Sinhala nationalist parties expect India to play a neutral role and very cautious about economic cooperation in terms of investments and trade between the two countries. As the Sinhala parties traditionally mobilised votes on pro and anti India basis, India’s role in Sri Lanka continues to be an issue. The upcountry Tamils have different basic needs such as housing, education and health and other social benefits. Absence of monthly income have made the community more vulnerable and dependent on the State, tea prices and as well as on estate owners. Since ‘2014 Sri Lanka’s tea export portion of the world market has dropped from 23 to 17 percent due to shrinking markets and fall in commodity prices’.²⁴ In this context India’s decision to provide housing is a positive step.

India’s PM visit to Sri Lanka and response to the visit by the Government of Sri Lanka once gain confirmed that both the countries are willing to strengthen bilateral cultural, economic and political relations. To maintain the positive momentum both countries might have to make policy decisions to address the expectations and interests of various communities, which is going to be a delicate and complex exercise in future.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

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