

**INDO – SRI LANKA RELATIONS:
CO-OPERATION AND CONFRONTATION – A POST INDEPENDENCE
SCENARIO**

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INTRODUCTION:

The Indo - Sri Lanka relation is an age old one. It goes back to the Mauryan period of Indian History. It was an era of bliss, when excellent relations prevailed between two countries. India and Sri Lanka had maintained very good friendly relations. Sri Lanka is separated from the Indian sub-continent only by twenty nine kilometers wide Palk Strait.¹ Although separated from the Indian main land, culturally, linguistically and ethnically Sri Lankans are closely related to the peoples in India.² Geographically, main land of India is fifty times larger than Sri Lanka. India had a considerable impact on Sri Lanka's development. They were friendly and co-operative, but at times it was conflict and controversial. India is the only neighbour of Sri Lanka, separated by the Palk Strait. The main objective of this research paper is to discuss various strategically important issues that have influenced the relationship of India and Sri Lanka time to time.

EARLY HISTORY

According to the Dipavamsa, the traditional Sri Lankan chronicle, attest to the wide ranging contacts which existed between Sri Lanka and India from early pre - Christian times. The historical annals give evidence for a continuous and consistent pattern of interaction between the island and the mainland. The interaction was highly related to migrations from North and South India and the linguistic connections between Sinhala language and Indo - Aryan - languages of North and Central India and between the Tamil languages on either side of Palk Strait. The interactions between the two countries have no doubt but, very ancient origin. Also, as Professor Bandaranayake has pointed out not only were there frequent invasions of Sri Lanka from Southern and Eastern India, in historical times, but there were also Sri Lankan

invasions of South India and intermittent Sri Lankan invasions of Southern Indian politics.³ The cultural dimension of the Indo - Sri Lanka relation was rich in many ways. Not only the Buddhism and Hinduism had their impact on the island, but also particularly the South Indian influences were strong in the spheres of art and archaeology in the organization of society and in the irrigation technology.⁴ The rich heritage of the Indo - Sri Lanka relations were generally friendly and co-operative but it was controversially affected by the Sri Lankan civil war when we look up the post-independence scenario of both India and Sri Lanka. The citizenship question of people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka arises first. It was the legacy of British rule.

THE CITIZENSHIP QUESTION OF INDIAN ORIGIN IN SRI LANKA

The Indian immigrants who had entered Sri Lanka before the nineteenth century settled down in the country and became merged with local population.⁵ But, the nineteenth century Indian immigrants were brought by British to Sri Lanka primarily as labourers or in search of employment. They had worked on road building, railway construction and public works and another types of jobs when Sri Lanka was under British rule. From 1857 onwards the British began to import cheap labourer from South India.⁶ The Governor Sri Edward Barnes, himself opened up a coffee plantation and he was followed by other members of the civil service.⁷ From 1827 - 1946, the plantation labourers were estimated from 10,000 to 665,853 in Sri Lanka. In post - independence Sri Lanka by 1961 there were 949,684 labourers from India.⁸ Later, the plantation labourers naturally increased and they were turned into permanent residents rather than seasonal migrants and thereby introduced the plurality in the multi-racial society.⁹ Their life style was different and separated from the Sinhalese neighbours.

In order to remove citizenship of one tenth of the population, the Indian immigrants were made by the Sri Lankan government with the enactment of the rigid and restrictive citizenship Act No. 18 of 1948.¹⁰ The number of immigrants lost their right to vote and unable to participate in the political activities. Nehru had invited Sri John Kotalawala, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka to discuss with him the unusual and outstanding issues on the Indian citizenship question in October 1953. The leaders met in New Delhi in January 1954 and entered into the Indo - Ceylon Agreement called as the Nehru - Kotalawala Pact of 1954.¹¹ Some migrants could not come under any categories and they became stateless persons. This issue had become a bone of contention. Neither Sri Lanka assimilated them nor did India accept them. They were recognized as "Stateless persons". To solve this issue, again Nehru argued that they should be normally by Ceylon nationals. Due to contradictory interpretation, the above pact was not able to implement.

Later, the Sri Lankan government introduced Indian and Pakistani Act of 1949, and had made number of Indian residents to become Sri Lankan Citizens.¹² (from 1951 - 1962, 1, 32, 313 Indian Citizens were admitted to Sri Lankan Citizenship) The unregistered Indian citizens problem cropped up, when Mrs. Srimavo Bandaranayake became the Prime Minister in 1960. Mrs. Bandaranayake had an agreement with the then Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri.

in New Delhi in October 1964 and a joint communiqué was issued.¹³ This Srima - Shastri Pact threw a new light to solve the problem of statelessness of Indian nationals and other related issues. The above pact was better than the earlier one and tried to solve the stateless persons of Indian origin. Few Indian nationals were repatriated to India. But the terms of the agreement of 1964 was not satisfactorily fulfilled. In 1970, Mrs. Bandaranāyake came to power and could not solve the problem.

In 1977, J.R. Jayewardene came to power in the elections. He had followed the policy of integration and had protected the fundamental rights of legal residents of Indian origin in Sri Lanka.¹⁴ The 1978 new constitution of the United National Party Government, had favoured the stateless persons of Indian origin mainly the plantation workers had been benefited. S. Thondaman, Ceylon workers' Congress Member and a Minister of the UNP Government had stated in 31st October 1978, that President Jayawardena had agreed to amend existing legislation on citizenship to resolve once and for all "the problem of stateless persons."¹⁵ Thereby, the citizenship question of Indian nationals in Sri Lanka came to an end.

THE FISHING DISPUTES

This fishing dispute is another serious issue that severely affects the Indo - Sri Lanka relations over the years. It was of the distress of the Tamil Nadu fishermen and the persecution they suffered at the hands of the Sri Lankan Navy personnel. There have been several alleged incidents by the defense forces on Indian fishermen fishing in the Palk Strait, where India and Sri Lanka are only separated by 12 nautical miles. This issue was argued that the Indian fishermen using mechanized trawlers which deprive the Sri Lankan fishermen including Tamils of their catch and also had damaged their fishing boats.¹⁶ The Sri Lankan Government wants India to ban use of mechanized trawlers in the Palk Strait region and the negotiations were carried out. There were no sincere agreement has been attained since India had favoured the regulating of these trawlers instead of banning them altogether. Sri Lanka got avoid because the use of mechanized trawlers is economically damaged.¹⁷ Indian Government has always taken up the issue of safety of Indian fishermen on a priority basis with the Government of Sri Lanka. A Joint Working Group has been constituted to deal with the issue related to Indian Fishermen straying in Sri Lankan Territorial waters, work out modalities for prevention of use of force against them and the early release of confiscated boats and explore possibilities of working towards bilateral arrangements for licensed fishing. The filling of fishermen has been going on.¹⁸ The fishermen issue in the Palk Strait is always a controversial one. It had sparked controversy over Indo - Sri Lanka relations. These fishermen issues have been in the Palk Strait for quite a long year.

THE AGREEMENT OF KACHCHATIVU

The other outstanding issue of Indo Sri Lanka relations was their maritime boundary that included the acceptance of Sri Lanka's claim over Kachchativu. The Kachchativu issue

was solved by the agreement signed June 28, 1974.¹⁹ According to this agreement Kachchativu became part of Sri Lanka. However, Indian fishermen and pilgrims would enjoy access to Kachchativu as hitherto and would not be required to obtain travel documents or visas for these purposes from Sri Lanka. The vessels of the two countries would also enjoy in each other's waters such rights as they had traditionally enjoyed.

AGREEMENT ON MARITIME BOUNDARIES, (MARCH 1976)

From 1956 the problem of coastal maritime boundaries remained unsolved. Nehru's administration extended the Indian Maritime boundaries which was harmful to Sri Lanka consequently Sri Lanka also expanded their boundaries.

In March 1976 an agreement was signed on their maritime boundaries also facilitating the establishment of firm economic and fishing zones. The agreement covered the economic zones extending to 320Km from the coastlines of the two countries.

On November 22, they signed another agreement by which they extended their maritime boundary in the Gulf of manner.

In the 70s, relations were cordial on the whole and there was progress in economic and technological Co-operation and scientific research. However, a new political dimension was added to their relationship. In both countries, the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Mrs. Bandaranaike declared a state of emergency. This development brought the relationship somewhat on a personal level too between the two Prime Ministers but created a ticklish issue for the future as the opposition in both the countries had denounced the emergency in their respective country and any change of Government would have some imperceptible impact on their mutual relationship.

THE SRI LANKAN CIVIL WAR AND THE INDIAN INTERVENTION

During the years 1970s and 1980s after the breakup of civil war in Sri Lanka, the Indo - Sri Lanka relations were believed to be very controversial. The geo-political situation had also played a greater role in the ethnic issue in Sri Lanka and in the Indo - Sri Lanka relations. After the outbreak of ethnic crisis in July 1983, the Government of Sri Lanka tried to solve it with the help of the Government of India. India intervened directly in the conflict for the first time after the Sri Lankan Government attempted to regain control of the Northern Jaffna region by means of economic blockade and military assault. India had provided food and medicine by air and sea. The negotiations were carried out, India and Sri Lanka entered into an agreement 13th amendment. The peace accord assigned a certain degree of regional autonomy in the Tamil areas with the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) controlling the regional council and called for the Tamil militant groups to lay down their arms.²⁰ Subsequently India had to send the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka to enforce the disarmament and to observe the regional council. Later the Indo - Sri Lanka Accord had become very unpopular among the Sri Lankan.

THE COMMERCIAL TIES

India and Sri Lanka are member nations of several regional and multilateral organizations such as the South Asian Association for the Regional Co-operation (SAARC), South Asia Co-operative Environment Program, South Asian Economic Union, working to enhance cultural and commercial ties. Since a bilateral free trade agreement was signed and came into effect in 2000. The Indo - Sri Lankan trade rose. Both nations are signatories of the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). Negotiations are under way to expand the future commercial relations.²¹

DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION

There are number of development projects implemented under Aid to Sri Lanka funds. India is very active in number of development activity in Sri Lanka. India had supplied medical equipment to hospitals at Hambantota and Paint Pedro, supplied 4 ambulances and implemented a cataract eye surgery program for 1500 people in central province. Sri Lankan Police officers were also trained. A hospital was upgraded in Trincomalee. There other numbers of development projects have been undertaken by the Government of India for the development of peace and co-operation in Sri Lanka.

CONCLUSION

The Indo - Sri Lanka relations have been maintained with different levels in different times. It had depended on the geopolitical and other political situations of both countries. The relations were very cordial and co-operation before independence of both the countries, but, the post-independence scenario had created some conflict critical and confrontation situation in the citizenship question and the ethnic crisis of Sri Lanka. Except that, the other areas of relationship of both countries are very rich and enhancing. In the 68th Republic day on 26th January 2017, the Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Hon. Sri Tharanjith Singh Chaudh had vividly pointed out the Sri Lanka is in the centre of India's trade, IT and commercial relations and the bilateral relations are strengthened through trust.²²

I wish Indo - Sri Lanka bilateral relations live long for the prosperity of both countries,

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