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INDIA'S POLICY TOWARDS ETHNIC CONFLICT IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT:

Every country is directly affected by developments in neighborhood so is India. As Sri Lanka is a closet neighbor of India and is separated from it at its narrowest point just by 22 miles of sea called Palk Strait, its ethnic conflict directly affected Tamil Nadu's (Indian state's) internal politics and as well as New Delhi's policy towards Colombo. This paper briefly discusses the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and India's policy response towards the Tamil problem and ethnic conflict in the island nation.



KEYWORDS: *neighborhood , internal politics, India's policy response.*

INTRODUCTION :

The civil war was fought in Sri Lanka during 1983-2009 between minority Tamils and Sinhalese and Sinhala dominated Government. The discrimination with Tamil people began in Sri Lanka much before the beginning of 1983 civil war in the island nation. Fierce oppression of Tamils started in Sri Lanka as 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981, and 1983 enemy of Tamil projects just as consuming of the Jaffna Public Library. For the most part viciousness was completed by the larger part Sinhalese hordes regularly with state support. Hence the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) led by Velupillai Prabhakaran fought to create an independent Tamil state called Tamil Ealam in the north-east of the island. Various attempts were made to bring the ethnic conflict to an end through negotiations but failed. After a long bloody military campaign, the Sri Lankan military defeated the Tamil Tigers in May 2009, bringing the conflict to an end. It is estimated that overall around 1,00,000 accounted and 70,000 unaccounted deaths took place from all sides.

India got actively involved in the neighboring island's civil war from the very beginning due to Southern Indian state Tamil Nadu's close ties with Sri Lanka. People of Tamil Nadu's ethnic kinship helped form close emotional bond with Sri Lankan Tamils and hence it led to strong support for the independence of Sri Lankan Tamils. However, during the course of the conflict, New Delhi supported Colombo's right to act against terrorist forces. At the same time, it conveyed its deep concern at the plight of the civilian population. Indian leadership and bureaucracy during official interactions with Sri Lanka always emphasized that Tamil people's rights and welfare should not be compromised in hostilities against the LTTE. The requirement for public compromise political settlement of ethnic issue was powerfully repeated by New Delhi at most elevated level. India generally preferred an arranged

political settlement which was satisfactory to all networks inside the structure of an assembled Lanka and which was predictable with a majority rule government, pluralism and regard for basic freedoms.

India upheld the two players of the contention in various ways. During 1983-1987 period, New Delhi through its knowledge organization Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) provided arms, preparing and financial help to different Sri Lankan Tamil assailants bunches including LTTE. It is accepted that by supporting diverse assailant gatherings, New Delhi needed to keep the Tamil freedom development isolated so it could apply command over it. India expanded the power of its inclusion in island's ethnic struggle in late 1980s and in June 1987, the Indian Air Force airdropped food packages to Jaffna while it was under seize by Sri Lankan powers. At the point when Colombo expressed that it was near overcoming the LTTE, India dropped 25 tons of food and medication by drop into regions held by the LTTE in an immediate move to help to the revolutionaries. Exchanges were held and Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord was endorsed on July 29, 1987 by Indian PM Rajeev Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Jayewardene. Under this agreement, Colombo set number of concessions to Tamil expectations, including devolution of capacity to regions, a consolidation of northern and eastern regions, and official status of Tamil language (This was instituted as thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka). New Delhi consented to build up request in the north and east through the Indian Peace Keeping power (IPKF) and would quit helping Tamil extremist gatherings. While most Tamil aggressor bunches set out their weapons and consented to look for a serene answer for the contention, the LTTE wouldn't incapacitate its contenders. In order to ensure the success of the accord, the IPKF tried to forcibly demobilize LTTE which ended up in full-scale conflict with them.¹ In post accord era, New Delhi tried to be neutral in the conflict between Tamil guerrillas and the island's ethnic Sinhalese majority. India's abrupt transformation from good neighbour to neighbourhood policeman came after Tamils violated an already shaky peace by killing more than 150 ethnic Sinhalese in the north and east.² Later the IPKF's presence in Sri Lanka was equally opposed by Sri Lankan Tamils and nationalist Sinhalese. However Indian PM Rajeev Gandhi refused to remove the IPKF from Sri Lanka. However, after Parliamentary elections in December 1989, new Prime Minister V.P.Singh requested the withdrawal of the IPKF and their last boat left Sri Lanka on March 24, 1990. The multi drawn out presence of IPKF in island country brought about the passings of 1200 Indian officers and north of 5000 Sri Lankans. The Indian government spent around 10.3 billion on the IPKF's general activity in Sri Lanka.

After death of ex-Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi by LTTE female self destruction aircraft in 1991, support for LTTE in India significantly dropped. It was subsequently announced that Prabhakaran chose to dispose of Gandhi since he expected that after political race Gandhi may become PM and could send the IPKF in Sri Lanka.³ In May 1992, India banned the LTTE, labeling it an "unlawful association."⁴ After Rajeev Gandhi's assassination, New Delhi fully changed its policy and resisted every option of mediation or intervention in the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka. Many experts compared Indian IPKF's experience in Sri Lanka with America's Vietnam. Some described it as "hands off policy" which is the opposite of interventionist policy.

As India's military intervention had angered both the Government and people of Sri Lanka equally, India adopted a new policy of non-intervention with active interest in the island nation.⁵ Thereafter, instead of ethnic conflict, India began to focus more on economic aspect of India-Sri Lanka cooperation. India's proscription of LTTE in 1992 initiated a trend that led to a proscription of LTTE in the United States in 1997 and European Union in 2006. India's changed policy towards LTTE helped

¹ Ibid.

² "India Policy Shift: Tamil conflict Poses New risks", *New York Times*, October 10, 1987. (online:Web) Accessed on 25.09.2021 URL <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/10/world/india-policy-shift-tamil-conflict-poses-new-risks.html>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Orland, Brian, "India's sri Lanka Policy: Towards economic Engagement", *IPCS Research Papers*, April 2008, New Delhi. (Online:Web) Accessed on 08.09.2021. URL ipcs.org.

⁵ "India-Sri Lanka Changing Political Relationship: Post -1990 Phase", *Mainstream*, Vol.XLVIII, No.25, June 12, 2010.

legitimize Colombo's diplomatic efforts to frame LTTE as a terrorist organization.⁶ Indian policy also tried to distinguish between the cause of Sri Lankan Tamils and the LTTE agenda. India always supported Sri Lankan Tamils "just aspirations" and hence lobbied for devolution of powers to benefit the Tamil community. In 2006, Indian foreign secretary Shyam Saran countered the LTTE's claim that it was the sole champion of Sri Lankan Tamil aspirations.⁷ However, any Indian military assistance to Sri Lanka seemed impractical due to objections of Tamil Nadu politicians. Similarly, the proposed Defence Cooperation Agreement was held up by political parties from Tamil Nadu.⁸

In May 2009, three decade long armed conflict between Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE came to an end. Sri Lanka's armed forces militarily defeated LTTE after long offensive military campaign led by General Sanath Fonseka. In post-conflict era, India's policy towards island's ethnic conflict had three main priorities. First, New Delhi focused on providing humanitarian assistance to displaced Tamils in the north and east. Second, India supported major development projects, primarily in the North.⁹ Third, New Delhi pressurized Colombo and main Sri Lankan Tamil political alliance, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), to work towards a negotiated settlement of ethnic conflict through devolution of power in Tamil majority areas in the north and east.¹⁰

The UNHRC held discussions in Geneva on human rights violations by Sri Lankan forces in final phase of war. During voting in Geneva on resolution holding Sri Lanka accountable for human rights violations during war in 2009, India voted in favour of resolution in 2009, 2010, 2012, and against in 2003.¹¹ However, New Delhi abstained in UNHRC voting in Geneva in 2014. In 2015, New Delhi endorsed the US-Sri Lanka co-sponsored UNHRC resolution 30/1 from which Sri Lanka withdrew last year. While China and Russia provided cover in UNHRC, the West had been aggressively intrusive. India pragmatically acted keeping in mind its national interest. New Delhi either abstained or supported resolution, once voted against it.¹² Overall, India pitched its case in a post-conflict Sri Lanka at the UN on two pillars- sovereignty of Sri Lanka and rights of Tamils under 13A.

To summarize, it can be said that India took keen interest in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict in the beginning due to Indian Tamils kinship and sympathy and local politics of Tamil Nadu. In early phase of the conflict, India not only provided arms, training and money to Tamil groups including LTTE but directly intervened by sending Air force planes to drop food items in Tamil majority areas. It also sent IPKF to Sri Lanka to implement Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord of 1987. However, after ex. PM Rajeev Gandhi's assassination in 1991, New Delhi completely changed its previous policy and adopted new policy of non-intervention (or hands off policy) with active interest in the island. New Delhi tried to protect its national interest by balancing its policy towards both Tamils and Sinhala led Sri Lankan Government. One hand, New Delhi supported Colombo's right to protect its unity, integrity and sovereignty, on the other, supported rights and aspirations of Tamil people. To ensure economic and political rights, India pressurized Sri Lanka to grant more powers to Tamil majority provinces through devolution of power and 13th Amendment of the Constitution. In Post-ethnic conflict era, New Delhi backed peacefully negotiated solution of ethnic problem which was acceptable to all parties of the problem. It also provided humanitarian and developmental assistance to Tamil majority provinces to address the plight of war affected Tamils.

⁶ Orland, Brian, "India's Sri Lanka Policy: Towards economic Engagement", *IPCS Research Papers*, 'op.cit.'

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "India and Sri Lanka after the LTTE", *International Crisis Group*, June 23, 2011 (Online: Web) Accessed on 25.09.2021 URL <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/india-non-kashmir/india-and-sri-lanka-after-ltte>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Ethnic divide in Lanka to test Indian diplomacy", *The Tribune*, March 25, 2021. (online: Web) Accessed on 24.09.2021 URL tribune.com/news/comment/ethnic-divide-in-lanka-to-test-indian-diplomacy-230034.

¹² Ibid.