

India's Post-Cold War Engagement with Sri Lanka: Exploring the Ethnic Dimension (1991-2009)

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Abstract

India's Sri Lanka Policy in the post-cold war period bears a deep imprint of history, particularly of those developments that marred the relations between the two countries in the 1980s. Any objective analysis of the prime movers of India's post-cold war Sri Lanka policy must take cognizance of the rather disturbing precedents in the bilateral relations of the two neighbours unfolded during the dying days of the cold war. In short, the colossal failure of India's overt political and military intervention in Sri Lanka (1987-1990) to "solve" the ethnic issue had profoundly impacted the broad trajectory of India's post-cold war Sri Lanka policy.

We can broadly contextualize India's Post-Cold-War Sri Lanka policy within two distinct time frames: From 1991-2009: the period of interaction in the backdrop of endemic civil war in Sri Lanka between the Government forces and the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and 2009 onwards i.e. engagement with the island nation in the post-civil war context.

This article will specifically explore India's post-cold war interactions with Sri Lanka vis-à-vis the ethnic question during the civil war period.

Keywords: Indo-Sri Lanka Bi-lateral Relations, The Ethnic Question, LTTE, Civil War in Sri Lanka, Indian Policy Priorities

The highly controversial ethnic issue in Sri Lanka and its complex historical baggage involving India, had significantly affected the terms of New Delhi's Post-Cold War engagement with Colombo. We will now analyse India's approach vis-à-vis the ethnic question in Sri Lanka in the Post-Cold war period.

The de-induction of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) from Sri Lankan soil in March 1990 after its three years long fruitless adventure entailing significant human and material cost brought about a humiliating end to India's direct military involvement in the island nation. The immediate task before the Indian policy establishment was to address the severe erosion of her image and arrest the ever-widening trust deficit vis-à-vis the Sri Lankan government and as well the Tamil constituency in Sri Lanka. At the same time India urgently needed to take stock of the worsening internal security scenario in Sri Lanka following the resumption of hostilities between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces since June 1990. (Eelam War II) Indian government was acutely aware about the potential security implications of the conflict particularly its attendant spillover effects in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where the Tamil refugee influx stood at around 1, 22,972 as per Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) data.¹

But it was the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991 by a LTTE suicide bomber that ultimately exposed in a brutal way the enormity of the menace India found itself in! The tragedy had effected a radical and irrevocable shift in terms of India's perception and treatment of the organization in particular and its overall approach to the ethnic question in Sri Lanka in general. From being perceived, in government circles, as a 'strategic instrument' to influence or pressurize the Sri Lankan government, the LTTE turned out to be a potent "security threat" for India. The Indian government eventually banned the organization in May 1992.² Apart from the assassination charge, LTTE had also been found involved in other terrorist activities in India. Indian Home Minister S.B. Chavan, in a statement in the parliament on 14 May 1992, accused the organization of indulging in "several terrorist acts in India" by organizing Tamil young men into an organization called the Tamil National Retrieval Troops (TNRT).³ As a consequence of this 'securitization' process, India's overall approach vis-à-vis the ethnic conflict raging in Sri Lanka became gradually depoliticized and non-committal.

The Indian government started articulating its response to the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka without any direct reference to the LTTE. The 1993-94 annual report of the Ministry of External Affairs stated that "India continued to favour a peaceful solution to the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka within the framework of the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka, through negotiations involving all those parties which have

¹ See Annual Reports (1990-91), Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India, p6

² See Avtar Singh Bhasin, India in Sri Lanka: Between Lion and the Tigers, Manas Publications, New Delhi, 2004, p262

³ Ibid, pp262-263

eschewed the path of violence”⁴ As far as the LTTE was concerned ,India formally requested the Sri Lankan Government for the extradition of the LTTE chief V. Prabhakaran in connection of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in June 1995.⁵

India welcomed the power devolution proposals announced by Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga in August 1995, following the failure of peace initiative with the LTTE undertaken by her a year earlier and resumption of conflict since April 1995(Eelam War III). In fact, with the outbreak of the third phase of the conflict, the question of India’s position and role in the ethnic cauldron of Sri Lanka once again re-emerged. On May 19, 1995 the Indian Minister of State for External Affairs Raghunandan Lal Bhatia told the Press Trust of India (PTI) that “Sri Lanka has approached a number of countries for help and India is considering what it can offer.”⁶ He outlined a possible trajectory of help in the form of “military consultations, information, and training” of Sri Lankan armed forces. In early May 1995, India had constructed a naval blockade across the Palk Strait to prevent LTTE from smuggling arms and fuel from India to Sri Lanka.⁷

In addition to these military means, India invested substantially in a wide range of humanitarian assistance initiatives to support the Sri Lankan government’s rehabilitation programme in civil war-torn Jaffna. In 1996 India sent 1750 tonnes of rice for the civilian population of Jaffna.⁸ Apart from food items, construction material worth approximately Rs.3.7 crores were also despatched in Colombo.⁹

Following steady escalation of conflict between the LTTE and the government forces, the demand for India’s involvement to address the worsening security scenario in Sri Lanka intensified with the influential Buddhist clergy of Sri Lanka, the National Sangha Council openly advocating for an Indian intervention to fight back the LTTE.¹⁰ LTTE’s capture of the strategically vital Elephant Pass in April 2000 made things far more complicated and in the face of an imminent LTTE takeover of Jaffna, the Sri Lankan government pleaded for India’s assistance to evacuate 40,000 troops trapped by the LTTE offensive.¹¹ However, the Indian government

⁴ See Annual Reports (1993-94), Ministry of External Affairs, Govt.of India, p5

⁵ See Annual Reports (1995-96), Op.cit. No.4,p6

⁶ See India in Sri Lanka,op.cit.no.37,p285

⁷ Ibid

⁸ See Annual Reports (1996-97), Ministry of External Affairs, Govt.of India, p6

⁹ See Annual Reports (1997-98), Ministry of External Affairs, Govt.of India, p15

¹⁰ See V.R.Raghavan, ‘Sri Lanka’s Call for help’, The Hindu, May 06,2000,available at <http://www.thehindu.com/2000/05/06/stories/05062523.htm>

¹¹ See Luke Harding, Plea for India to rescue 40,000 Sri Lankan troops, The Guardian (International Edition) 3 May, 2000, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/may/03/lukeharding>

firmly ruled out the possibility of any military intervention in Sri Lanka. The historical precedent of such an enterprise as well as the political compulsions of catering to the electorally significant Tamil constituency at home worked as a powerful deterrent on the Indian foreign policy establishment. On its part, instead India provided Sri Lanka non-lethal Offshore Patrol Vessels to enhance the Sri Lankan Navy's maritime surveillance capabilities vis-à-vis the LTTE¹² and re-notified the ban on the latter in May 2000 for another two years as per statutory requirement.¹³ These moves were actually a reassurance to the Sri Lankan government of India's commitment to act tough on the Tigers.

Despite being unable to commit herself 'militarily' in the Sri Lankan Crisis which in effect pushed the Sri Lankan government to fend for own defence by importing arms from countries like Israel, Pakistan, Czech Republic on an emergency basis, India tried to remain a politically relevant player in the island nation. External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh's visit to Sri Lanka in June 2000 can be interpreted in that light. During the visit, he reiterated India's commitment to the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka and announced a credit facility of US \$100 million as "assistance in the humanitarian and economic sphere to ease any constraints that may be currently faced by Sri Lanka."¹⁴

India welcomed the resumption of the peace process with the LTTE undertaken by the newly elected United National Front (UNF) government led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe in 2001. In the joint statement issued during the latter's visit to New Delhi in December 2001, it was mentioned that "Government of India welcomes the cessation of hostilities announced by the LTTE and the positive response of the Government of Sri Lanka and hopes this will begin a process to restore lasting peace. Government of India is fully supportive of the measures outlined by His Excellency Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to take the peace process forward."¹⁵

The Sri Lankan government and the LTTE eventually signed a Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) in February 2002 under Norwegian facilitation. As per the terms of the agreement a Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, led by Norway, was installed to monitor the ceasefire, particularly the decommissioning of weapons. The Indian

¹² See India-Sri Lanka Defence Agreement, The Hindu, October 26, 2004, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/2004/10/26/stories/2004102602761000.htm>

¹³ See India in Sri Lanka, op.cit.no.37, p.299

¹⁴ Nirupama Subramanian, Loan to ease Sri Lanka's war burden? The Hindu, June 13, 2000, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2000/06/13/stories/01130006.htm>

¹⁵ India-Sri Lanka Joint Statement, December 24, 2001, available at http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/6027/IndiaSri_Lanka_Joint_Statement

government like a neutral observer kept a watchful eye on the developments unfolding in Sri Lanka, while iterating its commitment to the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the island nation and to the restoration of a lasting peace through a peaceful, negotiated settlement meeting the just aspirations of all elements of the Sri Lankan society.¹⁶ The Norwegian government kept India duly informed about the peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE which made some progress until the latter withdrew from the negotiations in April 2003. India actively rallied behind the Sri Lankan government's proposal for an interim administration which had been rejected by an intransigent LTTE. India's priorities vis-à-vis the peace process were clearly articulated in the joint statement issued during Wickremasinghe's visit to New Delhi in October 2003. It stated, "India will maintain an abiding interest in the security of Sri Lanka and remains committed to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. India would welcome a resolution of the current impasse in the peace process and an early resumption of negotiations. Any interim arrangement should be an integral part of the final settlement and should be in the framework of the unity and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka."¹⁷ Another significant aspect of the statement was that it outlined a trajectory for a possible defence cooperation agreement between the two countries. It was mentioned in the document that "the two sides will commence discussions with a view to concluding a defence cooperation agreement at the earliest."¹⁸ The proposed agreement was conceived as a framework under which existing transactions of non-lethal equipment which were already taking place since 2000, could continue. In March 2004, in a complimentary gesture to the proposed agreement, India removed Sri Lanka from the negative list of countries to enable export of defence and defence-related equipment to be resumed to Colombo.¹⁹ Though the defence agreement eventually did not materialize, but India's willingness to commit herself to such an instrument lent credence to her commitment to Sri Lanka's unity and territorial integrity.

Following the National Election of April 2004, Mahinda Rajapaksha of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) became the Prime Minister. His dominance over the entire political process was further consolidated with his elevation to the post of the President of Sri Lanka in November 2005. A 'hawk' by nature, Rajapaksha's rather

¹⁶ India-Sri Lanka Joint Statement June 11, 2002, available at https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/13710/IndiaSri_Lanka_Joint_Statement

¹⁷ India - Sri Lanka, Joint Statement October 21, 2003 available at <http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/7770/India++Sri+Lanka+Joint+Statement>

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ India in Sri Lanka: Between Lion and the Tigers, op. cit. no.37,p340

strident attitude towards the ethnic reconciliation coupled with LTTE's recalcitrance and rampant use of violence in spite of its formal adherence to the CFA brought the fragile peace process in complete disarray and eventually led to the outbreak of Eelam war IV(2006-2009).

As the war raged on with the Sri Lankan Government conducting a determined military campaign in a 'Fight to Finish' mode against the LTTE, India increasingly found her priorities to be exogenously dictated by the broader dynamics of the conflict. While at the political front India continued to call for a political resolution of the conflict with its attendant conditionalities, at the ground level the Indian government contributed significantly to Colombo's military offensive by sharing vital intelligence inputs regarding the activities of the Sea Tigers (Naval Wing of the LTTE) and offering military training to Sri Lankan Defence Personnel. In fact, India also had been providing extensive training facilities to the Sri Lankan defence forces over the last several years. India had trained thousands of Sri Lankan personnel at its military institutions ranging from Counter-Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School at Vairengte (Mizoram) to School of Artillery at Devlali (Maharashtra), apart from providing specialized naval courses in gunnery, navigation, communication and anti-submarine warfare.²⁰ Sri Lankan Army Officers regularly underwent weapons training or attended courses at the National Defence College (NDC) in New Delhi.²¹ Following the outbreak of the Eelam War IV, there had been a steady expansion of inter-state cooperation in this field. The document titled 'Brief on India-Sri Lanka Relations' released by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India on 26 February 2007, stated the following under Indo-Sri Lanka Defence Cooperation:

"A major part of the training of Sri Lankan Armed Forces, i.e. up to 53%, is carried out in India. There has been a significant increase in the number of training slots offered to Sri Lankan armed forces personnel in recent years. For 2006-7, the allotted slots are 870 with 545 for the Army, 216 for Navy and 109 for Air Force. In 2005-06, 977 courses were offered; and for 2007-08, courses requested are 2579 with 1208 for Army, 518 for Navy and 853 for Air Force. Besides this, there is continued cooperation in terms of exchange of visits and cooperation between Navies...."²²

²⁰ Data sourced from http://www.info.gov.lk/news_update/Current_Affairs/ca201106/20110629sl_india_hold_first_army.htm

²¹ John Cherian, A Friend in Need, Frontline, Vol. 20-Issue.12, June 07-20,2003

²² '53% of Sri Lanka's external military training provided by India' Sri Lanka Guardian, March 28, 2008, available at <https://www.slguardian.org/53-of-sri-lankas-external-military-training-provided-by-india/>

But India had been extremely circumspect with regard to the provision of direct operational support to Sri Lanka's 'war' against the LTTE due to possible negative repercussions in Tamil Nadu. The mainstream political parties of Tamil Nadu as well as the state government had been vociferously critical of Colombo's brutal military campaign and urged the Indian government for immediate action to salvage the plight of the ordinary Tamils trapped in the war zone of Sri Lanka.²³ Under such circumstances, it was difficult for the government of India to respond positively to Colombo's request of a joint patrolling of the Palk Strait to prevent LTTE adventures at the sea.²⁴ However, following the discovery of an elaborate LTTE network in South India, The Indian government decided to upgrade coastal security by training the Tamil Nadu Coastal Security Group for patrolling the Palk Straits.²⁵

India still had reservations on the question arms transfer to Sri Lanka. Due to domestic political compulsions the Indian establishment maintained a studied reticence on its arms dealings (albeit limited and essentially defensive, non-lethal in nature) with Sri Lanka. In 2005, on the eve of President Rajapaksha's first state visit to India, New Delhi supplied two indigenous Indra-II low-flying detection radar to Sri Lanka.²⁶ In January 2007 India sent another military radar to Sri Lanka which was followed by the despatch of a similar radar in June. The radars were meant to help Sri Lanka ward off the threat of airborne attacks by the LTTE.²⁷ Apart from that India also provided a range of defensive equipment like lifesaving flak jackets, automatic 40mm L-70 close range anti-aircraft guns to Sri Lanka.²⁸

By mid-2007 the Eelam war rapidly escalated to a point of no return. In July 2007, after a massive military campaign, the Sri Lankan Army established control over the entire eastern province, aided significantly by the defection of the main LTTE commander in the province, Colonel Karuna.²⁹ As the government forces penetrated deeper into the LTTE stronghold further in the north, inflicting substantial collateral damage, India found itself in a strategically perilous position while her traditional adversaries like China and Pakistan conveniently stepped into the Sri Lankan theatre as the logistical fulcrum of Colombo's gigantic war machine.

²³ See Avtar Singh Bhasin (Ed) India's Foreign Relations-2008 Documents, Geetika Publishers, New Delhi, p1453

²⁴ See Avtar Singh Bhasin (Ed) India's Foreign Relations-2007 Documents, Geetika Publishers, New Delhi, 2008, p1461

²⁵ See Sandra Destradi, 'Indian Foreign and Security Policy in South Asia: Regional Power Strategies', Routledge, London and New York, 2012, p78

²⁶ See India's Foreign Relations-2007, op.cit. No.59, p1464

²⁷ Ibid, p1463

²⁸ See Sandra Destradi, op.cit. no.60., p78; see also Looking Beyond The Conflict: Changing Dynamics of India-Sri Lanka Ties, op.cit. no.16, p139

²⁹ See Shivshankar Menon, 'Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy', Allen Lane, 2016, p137

Over the years, specifically under the regime of Mahinda Rajapaksha, Sri Lanka had assiduously developed intensive military engagement with both the countries. SIPRI yearbook 2009 mentions that ‘Between mid-2002 and mid-2007 Sri Lanka received at least \$140 million worth of military equipment from China.’³⁰ These military equipment reportedly involved ammunition, anti-tank guided missiles, rocket launchers and shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, deep penetration bombs and rockets, mortar ammunition, night vision devices, tanks, F7G jets, naval vessels, radars etc.³¹ Apart from that in April 2007 Colombo had signed a classified \$37.6 million deal with China's Poly Technologies in April to supply its defence forces with ammunition and ordnance for the army and navy in addition to varied small arms.³² Pakistan too had been in the fray supplying huge amounts of automatic rifles, heavy mortars, multi-barrel rocket launchers, artillery and tank shells to Sri Lanka.³³

Indian discomfiture regarding these arms acquisitions by Sri Lanka was clearly reflected in the statement made by the then National Security Adviser M.K.Narayanan in Chennai on May 31, 2007. Mr. Narayanan stated:

“We are the big power in this region. Let us make it very clear. We strongly believe that whatever requirements the Sri Lankan government has, they should come to us. And we will give them what we think is necessary. We do not favour their going to China or Pakistan or any other country. [...] We will not provide the Sri Lankan government with offensive capability. That is the standard position...”³⁴

At the diplomatic front India continued to profess the need for a political solution of the conflict even as the Sri Lankan government formally withdrew from the ceasefire agreement in January 2008. The move was a clear enough indicator of the future orientation of Colombo's policy priorities vis-à-vis LTTE. India though welcomed the interim steps for power devolution, in tune with the 13th amendment, recommended by the All-Party Representative Conference (APRC) formed by President Rajapaksha. However, the ground reality appeared to be extremely bleak. The humanitarian situation deteriorated significantly as violence intensified in the north. Vitally concerned and pressurized domestically, The Indian government upped the diplomatic

³⁰ See Jayantha Dhanapala and John Gooneratne, Sri Lanka: China as a model of Growth and Modernisation, in S.D.Muni and Tan Tai Yong(Ed) A Resurgent China: South Asian Perspectives, Routledge, 2012, p256

³¹ Ibid

³² ‘Chinese arms, radar for Sri Lanka military’, TamilNet, Monday, 04 June 2007, available at <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=22366>

³³ ‘Sri Lanka still sourcing arms from Pak, China’, Times of India, March 4, 2009, available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Sri-Lanka-still-sourcing-arms-from-Pak-China/articleshow/4220337.cms>

³⁴ ‘Centre considering unified command for armed forces’, The Hindu, June 01, 2007, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/Centre-considering-unified-command-for-armed-forces/article14771560.ece>

ante vis-à-vis Sri Lanka. From mid-2008 onwards, there had been a series of visits to and from Colombo to get apprised of, assess and address the humanitarian crisis. In June 2008, A high-level Indian team represented by the National Security Adviser M.K.Narayanan, Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon and Defence Secretary Vijay Singh made a two-day visit to Colombo. The team met with President Rajapaksha and held extensive talks regarding the current security situation in the country with senior Sri Lanka government officials, including Lalith Weeraratunga, Secretary to the Sri Lankan President, Defence Secretary Gothabhaya Rajapaksa, Basil Rajapaksa, Senior Adviser to the President, and the service commanders.³⁵

As Colombo's war campaign against the LTTE marched in full swing in northern Sri Lanka, civilian casualties continued to soar dramatically. In a diplomatic offensive, National Security Adviser, M K Narayanan, on behalf of the government of India, summoned The Sri Lankan Deputy High Commissioner on October 6, 2008 to express India's grave concern and unhappiness at the growing casualties of unarmed Tamil civilians as a result of military action by Colombo. The need for the revival of the political process was also reiterated.³⁶ India's discontent at the turn of events in Sri Lanka was further clearly manifested in Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh's remark on the situation in the island in an interaction with the journalists on October 15, 2008. Dr. Singh stated, "We always believe that the situation in Sri Lanka does not call for military victory. It calls for a negotiated, political settlement which respects the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka and at the same time respects the essential human rights of minorities, particularly Tamil minorities."³⁷

The following day, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee stated categorically India's position on the ever-deteriorating situation in Northern Sri Lanka. The statement needs to be quoted extensively: "The situation in Sri Lanka remains a matter of grave concern to us in India. We are particularly worried about the humanitarian effect of the continuing conflict on civilians who have been caught up in circumstances not of their making. It is essential that their rights be respected, that they be immune from attacks, and that food and other essential supplies be allowed to reach them. We have consistently made it clear that a return to normalcy cannot be brought about by military means or battle field victories. What is required in Sri Lanka is a

³⁵ See India's Foreign Relations-2008, op. cit. No.58, p1450

³⁶ Ibid, pp1453-54

³⁷ Ibid, p1454

peacefully negotiated political settlement which allows each community to realize its own potential within the framework of a united Sri Lanka.

Government of India will do all in its power to achieve this goal, to ameliorate the humanitarian conditions in Sri Lanka...”³⁸

In pursuance of the goal of providing humanitarian assistance for the internally displaced and affected civilians in Northern Sri Lanka, India dispatched nearly 2000 tonnes of relief material mobilised by the State Government of Tamil Nadu on 13th November 2008.³⁹

In fact, from the beginning of 2009, as Colombo's War against the LTTE reached its crescendo amidst heavy civilian casualties (on 2nd January 2009 government forces captured Kilinochchi, administrative capital of the LTTE in the northern province. The LTTE leadership abandoning Jaffna, retreated to the Mullaitivu jungles.) The Indian government clearly realized its inherent limitations to influence the dynamics of the war or effect its cessation under any possible circumstance. Therefore, at best it could do was to call for optimal minimization of the costs of the war through provision of humanitarian assistance for the internally displaced innocent Tamil civilians. And quite significantly, as far as the operational objective of the war was concerned (i.e. the annihilation of the LTTE) New Delhi's policy priorities gradually started to echo that of Colombo. In January 2009, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee made a “short notice” visit to Sri Lanka ostensibly to ensure that human rights and safety of civilians were protected.”⁴⁰ The Minister's statement at the end of the visit was quite pertinent as it signalled India's tacit acceptance of the viability of military solution to Sri Lanka's protracted ethnic conflict. He said: “I stressed that military victories offer a political opportunity to restore life to normalcy in the Northern Province and throughout Sri Lanka, after twenty three years of conflict...”⁴¹

Over the next couple of months, Indian diplomacy strived to ensure effective political and humanitarian management of the war in coordination with International Players notably the United States and Great Britain. In pursuance of the objective, in February 2009, the Indian government sent a full-fledged emergency medical

³⁸ Ibid, pp1455-56

³⁹ Ibid, p1467

⁴⁰ Nirupama Subramanian, How India kept pressure off Sri Lanka, The Hindu, March 16, 2011, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/How-India-kept-pressure-off-Sri-Lanka/article14950828.ece>

⁴¹ See Avtar Singh Bhasin (Ed) India's Foreign Relations-2009 Documents, Geetika Publishers, New Delhi, 2010, p1514

unit with mobile field hospital to Sri Lanka to cater to the urgent medical needs of the injured civilians and internally displaced persons.⁴² The Indian diplomatic mission, entrusted with the task of maintaining official liaison with the Sri Lankan Government comprised of Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon, National Security Adviser (NSA) M.K. Narayanan and Defence Secretary Vijay Singh. In their meetings with the Sri Lankan government officials, they basically raised three issues: i) Provision of safe corridors for the civilians to exit the fighting zone ii) non-use of fighter jets in the conflict to bombard LTTE positions surrounded by civilians and iii) declaration and enforcement of an amnesty policy.⁴³ While the Sri Lankan government was considerate with regard to the first two demands and accordingly took some concrete steps, but it was staunchly uncompromising on the question of granting amnesty.⁴⁴ However, rather than pressurizing Sri Lanka to halt military operations or to agree to western cease-fire proposals, India was prepared to let Colombo enjoy the tactical manoeuvrability to accomplish its war mission. Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon and National Security Adviser (NSA) M.K. Narayanan thought it would be counterproductive to 'gang up' against Colombo under the auspices of the United Nations as it would provide President Rajapaksha a rationale to fight off international pressure and thereby indirectly bolster his domestic political standing.⁴⁵

During the dying days of the war, in late April 2009, The Indian government, under pressure from the coalition partner (DMK) made a last ditch attempt to press for a pause in government operations in Northern Sri Lanka.⁴⁶ On the 23rd of that month, The Indian government sent two special emissaries, Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon and National Security Adviser M.K.Narayanan to Sri Lanka. The statement issued by the External Affairs Minister Mr.Pranab Mukherjee on the eve of the visit reflected the palpable desperation and helplessness of the Indian establishment regarding developments in northern Sri Lanka.

“Government of India has been monitoring with deep concern and anxiety the evolving situation in Sri Lanka, in particular the conditions of the Tamil civilians in the conflict zones...

⁴² Ibid,p1524, see also India to send military medical team to Sri Lanka next week, The Hindu, March 6,2009 available at <https://meelib.nic.in/?1849?005>

⁴³ See ShivShankar Menon, op.cit. no.64, p140

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ How India kept pressure off Sri Lanka, op.cit. no.75

⁴⁶ Ibid

We are very unhappy at the continued killing in Sri Lanka. All killing must stop. There must be an immediate cessation of all hostilities. In order to convey these concerns to the Government of Sri Lanka the Government of India has decided to send two special emissaries to Sri Lanka.”⁴⁷

However, unsurprisingly such drastic measure by the Government of India could not in any way impact the course of events which eventually culminated in the formal termination of the war and death of Prabhakaran, announced by the Sri Lankan government on 18 May, 2009.

The Indian government reacted to the news with restraint. The statement issued from the Ministry of External Affairs by the official Spokesperson on Sri Lanka, while assured of India's help in the relief and rapid rehabilitation of the internally displaced, also reminded Colombo to address the root causes of the ethnic conflict through the inclusion of political steps towards the effective devolution of power within the Sri Lankan Constitution.⁴⁸

Conclusion:

Reconciling the complex dynamics of transnational ethnic identity with the strategic imperatives of statecraft had been a persistent conundrum of India's Sri Lanka policy during the period under review. (1991-2009). On the one hand, the Tamil linkage inescapably drew India into vortex of ethnic turmoil in the island nation and moralized the discourse of Indian foreign policy vis-à-vis Colombo. On the other hand, India's conscious withdrawal from the conflict management process in Sri Lanka, the gradual diminution of her influence there and the simultaneous penetration of extra –regional powers, not favourably pre-disposed towards her, had made the strategic imperatives of New Delhi's Sri Lanka policy acutely pressing. An objective analysis India's negotiation with the ethnic question in Sri Lanka during the period outlined above, clearly reveals how the contradictory pulls and pressures generated by these two distinct variables put huge strains on the foreign policy making process, consequently producing suboptimal outcomes that oscillated in between the realm of desirability and feasibility.

⁴⁷ India's Foreign Relations-2009 Documents, op.cit. no.76, p1530

⁴⁸ Ibid, p1532