

Associate Paper

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The Politics of Sri Lanka-Tamil Nadu Relations

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Key Points

- Sub-regional and caste tensions will continue to characterise relations between Sri Lankan Tamils and their brethren in Tamil Nadu.
- India's policy towards Sri Lanka will remain in support of the unitary status of the Sri Lankan state, which it views as critical to its own national unity and territorial integrity.
- Sri Lanka-India ties can improve significantly if Sri Lanka's relations with Tamil Nadu can be harmonised.

Summary

With the ongoing coverage that Sri Lanka receives in the Western media today, very little is given to the divisions among Tamils themselves and the complex inter-relationship between Sri Lanka, and its immediate neighbour, the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Indeed, the turbulence that often characterises Sri Lanka's relations with India more often than not stems from ongoing tensions between Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. It is this complex triangular dynamic that will remain the next major hurdle in stabilising Sri Lanka-India relations, one that India appears to be paying greater attention towards.

Analysis

The Shadow of Tamil Nadu

Since the end of the civil war in May 2009, an important element that continues to shape the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan government's relations with India is the existential fear of Tamil Nadu's potential to influence the Indian central government to adopt anti-Sri Lanka policies. The Cholan Tamil invasions of antiquity, the sheer size of Tamil Nadu population numbering 72 million, the concentration of Tamils in Sri Lanka's Northern and Eastern Provinces and parts of the island's central highlands, have contributed to entrench this fear in the Sinhalese mindset.

It is these contributory factors the Sinhalese assume that provided the psychological strength if not the political rationale to the rise of Tamil separatism in the country. This historically rooted fear and the paranoia about Tamil Nadu, has tended to cloud the

objectivity in Sri Lanka's official analysis of inter-Tamils relations between Chennai and Jaffna on the one hand and the Chennai-Delhi political complexity on the other, both together translate the assumed threat from Tamil Nadu a myth.

Regional Differences

To start with, the Sri Lankan Tamils, although they originate from the South Indian Dravidian stock and are inseparably linked with Tamil Nadu by language, religion and culture have a historical suspicion if not resentment towards the domineering character of their Dravidian brethren in Sri Lanka. In one of the popular Tamil adages still current in Jaffna, *vadakkaththanaiyum vayittukuttthayum nampathe*, meaning, do not trust the northerner and the stomach ache. The northerner refers to the South Indian. Adages may sound trivial to be considered seriously, but they are not born out of a social vacuum and when contextually placed they bear deeper meanings.

In the 1960s, the anti-Tamil Nadu sentiments were openly expressed by the Progressive Tamil Writers Association of Sri Lanka which campaigned against the influx of cheap and commercially oriented Tamil books, magazines, and films that were flooding the local market at that time. Their protest against those *kuppai ilakkiyankal* (garbage literature) was not simply a battle for market protection to local output but was also a cry against the hegemony of South Indian writers and artists and therefore was a demand for equal recognition of Sri Lanka's indigenous Tamil literary identity.

This campaign, championed at that time by the Tamil Daily, *Thinakaran*, and by a group of Tamil academics and writers, openly accused Tamil Nadu of cultural discrimination. This agitation, won the sympathy and support of the then socialist government led by President Sirimavo Bandaranaike who served as Prime Minister of Sri Lanka two times, 1960–65, 1970–77. Ironically however, the demand for indigenous identity and equal recognition of local Tamil literature and arts also unwittingly created a similar demand by the Indian-Tamil writers of the Central Highlands, a sub-Tamil group of 19th century origins.

Intra-Tamil Politics

This internal division within the Sri Lankan Tamil community is not confined to the world of literature and arts only. It spilled over into politics and social relations as well. Politically, the Indian segment of the Tamil community created its own political party and trade unions and never allied, with either of the two major Tamil parties, the Ceylon Tamil Congress (CTC) and the Federal Party (FP). It was the CTC in the early fifties that supported the Ceylon Citizenship Act which effectively disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of Indian Tamils residing in the island, an event not lost in the memory of the Indian Tamil community.

Even during the era of the LTTE or Tamil Tigers although a small number of Indian Tamil youth joined the LTTE's fighting cadre the majority of that community kept aloof from the secessionist struggle. This aloofness was also due partly to the fact that these Tamils are living in the heart of the Sinhalese inhabited territory and partly and more importantly to the almost complete social disconnectedness between them and the local Tamils. This disconnectedness is basically the result of a dichotomy in social stratification between the two groups.

The caste structure among the Tamils of Sri Lanka is significantly different from that of Tamil Nadu. For example, the highest caste, Brahmins, of the subcontinent is not at par but higher in status, at least from the Indian perspective, than the elite caste, vellalars, among the Sri Lankan Tamils. Similarly, the lower castes of Tamil Nadu, from which the vast majority of the Central Highland Tamils hail, from a Sri Lankan Tamil perspective, are not at par but

sometimes even considered lower than the lower castes among local Tamils. The almost total absence of inter-caste marriages between the Brahmins of Tamil Nadu and the Vellalars of Sri Lanka on the one hand and between the Sri Lankan Tamils of the North and East and the Tamils of the Central Highlands on the other is a reflection of the deep social cleavage between the Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils.

These inter-Tamil socio-cultural divisions reinforce the complexity of political aspirations of the different Tamil segments. It is true that the struggle for Tamil Eelam, or a separate Tamil state, by the LTTE had and still has vocal support in Tamil Nadu. Even after the demise of the LTTE the Sri Lankan Tamil cause continues to carry favour among rivalling political parties in the Southern Indian state. However, when the crunch time came in 2008 and the LTTE faced annihilation at the hands of Sri Lankan security forces, the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister at the time, Muthuvel Karunanidhi, who publicly shed tears for the sufferings of Sri Lankan Tamils, was paradoxically less enthusiastic and shockingly muted in his support of the LTTE. Even the current Chief Minister, Jayaram Jayalalitha, a Brahmin by caste and a former Tamil cinema-idol, who is now claiming to do everything within her power to produce the Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse before the International Criminal Court of Justice, is an ardent opponent of the LTTE. So why this contradiction and double talk?

The hegemonic aspirations of the Tamil Nadu elite are at odds with the aspirations of the LTTE. Historically, Tamil Nadu has been the universally acknowledged champion of the Tamil language, culture and interests. In the international arena Tamil Nadu enjoys a virtual monopoly, not to mention threaten India's territorial integrity, over Tamil interests and acts as the chief spokesperson over these matters. Yet, Tamil Nadu is only a regional state and therefore has no independent representation at the United Nations or its agencies. The Tamil voice at the world forum can only be heard through New Delhi and its representatives. At that level New Delhi's national interest takes priority over Chennai's regional interest.

Hypothetically, an internationally recognized sovereign Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, which will have its own representatives and flag at the UN would seriously jeopardise Tamil Nadu's monopoly. This nagging concern amongst the Brahminic elite in South India, which for all intents and purposes is the ruling class that carries more clout at the federal level, speaks volumes about the strong and silent backing the Sri Lanka received from India during the last stages of the civil war.

As long as Tamil Nadu remains within the Indian Federation without seceding to become independent as it tried and failed in the 1950s, its support for any Tamil separatist political struggle, Eelam or otherwise, will not go beyond emotive rhetoric. It is New Delhi and not Chennai that will eventually determine the future of Tamils in Sri Lanka, and New Delhi's geopolitical interests will always take precedence over the interests of Sri Lankan Tamils. This argument may be too unpalatable to digest by the Tamil community in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora; but it is this complexity of relations between Chennai and New Delhi on the one hand and Chennai and Jaffna on the other that ultimately left the LTTE high and dry in their last redoubt.

The LTTE and other Tamil militant groups relied heavily on the support of Tamil Nadu politicians to bring pressure on Delhi; but New Delhi's successful domestic diplomacy kept the Tamil Nadu government in check and the Indian central government, in spite of its 'double-track-strategy' of negotiation and military pressure, never compromised on its stand for the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka. Even the so called Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam, the remnants of the LTTE in the diaspora after its crushing military defeat are

trying to rebuild the secessionist movement, have failed to understand this basic geopolitical fact.

From New Delhi's perspective the strategic and economic advantages of an undivided Sri Lanka far outweigh the benefits of any military subjugation of the island. The recent diplomatic developments between the two countries point towards the same direction. However, Tamil Nadu's influence in forming coalition governments can complicate matters for India and will likely remain a source of ongoing tension between Sri Lanka and India in the future.

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