

Policies & Perspectives



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Beyond the Optics: Prime Minister's Lanka Visit

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Indian Prime Minister's two day visit to Sri Lanka (May 11-12) to inaugurate the International Vesak Day, as expected, drew generous attention in domestic and international media. From Buddhist push to neighbourhood thrust; from impacting Tamil aspirations to debating Chinese inroads into Sri Lanka; the media debates and reports on the visit largely meandered between the obvious interpretations. It was not a bilateral visit and as clarified by President Sirisena himself, no agreements and accords were slated to be initialed.

Going beyond the optics, one discerns two cardinal takeaways from the visit, one of which was highly overplayed in the local media, and the other, considerably underplayed, that has much nuanced and wider implications than hitherto discussed in the public forums. Prime Minister Modi's Lanka visit, though not structured as a normal bilateral event, was more than what appeared obvious and if one restricts it only to the tangibles, then the perspective might be indeterminate, if not entirely lost. As Richard Bach has quoted, "Don't believe what your eyes are telling you for all they show is limitation. Look with your understanding."

The very first issue that has been considerably underplayed was portrayal of PM's visit and address to the Upcountry Tamils. This was largely seen as a continuation of India's policy to stand guarantor to the wellbeing of the Sri Lankan Tamil community. Notwithstanding the credibility of this assessment, the visit to Lanka's indentured Tamils has many more significant connotations. Prime Minister Modi's reach out to the Tamils of Indian origin coincides with the centenary of abolition of indentureship. The 'Upcountry/Malaiyaka Tamils', also called Estate Tamils or Indian Origin Tamils, were brought here to work in the plantation sector by the British in early nineteenth and twentieth century. Along with Sri Lanka, such labour force was also transported to other British colonies like Mauritius, South Africa, Guyana, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, and Suriname under extreme harsh and inhuman conditions. As year 2017 marks centenary of abolition of indentureship, it was only apt for an Indian Prime Minister to acknowledge the contributions of the Malaiyaka Tamils to the development of their country of adoption and also of their efforts in preserving their distinct culture and identity while peacefully assimilating with the majority and respecting unity of Sri Lanka.

Other important aspect of PM Modi's visit to Upcountry areas, making him the first Indian PM to do so since independence, was to send out a clear message to the Lankan Tamil leadership. Here it may be recalled that Tamils in Sri Lanka are not a homogeneous entity and can broadly be divided into three groups - Northern Tamils (belonging to Northern Province, sometimes called Jaffna Tamils), Eastern Tamils (belonging to Eastern Province, also called Batticaloa Tamils) and the Estate Tamils of Central, Uva and Sabaragamuwa Province. Even before and after the civil war, the Tamil political leadership and intelligentsia has largely been controlled by Northern Tamils, with comparatively smaller space for the Eastern Tamils and almost none for the Upcountry Tamils. In addition, the prominent Tamil political front called 'Tamil National



Alliance' (TNA), sitting in opposition in the Parliament, seems largely guided by the agenda of Lankan Tamil diaspora.

The activities of the Tamil diaspora on various international forums has been one of the biggest obstacles faced by the National Unity Government in the post war reconciliation process. Of many other implausible and impractical things, the diaspora keeps harping on merger of Northern and Eastern Provinces and involving international experts and prosecutors in the investigation of alleged war crimes by Sri Lankan army in the last phase of the Eelam war. This stance, as adopted the TNA, has created more polarization among the Sinhala and Tamils, as the former are against the merger, fearing that a united Tamil province will pose greater challenge to country's unity. Their demand of involving international experts is not in tune with government of India's support for a 'domestically driven investigation' to establish truth of the last phase of war. India has been advising the TNA leaders to cooperate with the Sri Lankan and Indian governments and not to expect too much too early, but with only marginal success so far.

The Upcountry Tamils, on the other hand, have a better record of assimilating with the mainstream communities and participating in democratic structures from the time of Saumyamoorthy Thoondaman. Thus, by not setting his foot in the North, PM has, in a way, given a message to the Tamil leadership that they need to be flexible and accommodative like the Upcountry Tamils and have faith in the Sri Lankan government. Unlike TNA, the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) representing Upcountry Tamils is part of United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), a partner of the ruling coalition. It needs to be remembered that during his visit to Sri Lanka in February this year, Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar too had expressed happiness about the Indian Origin Tamils (IOTs) being in the Sri Lankan national mainstream, fully participating in governance and securing benefits for themselves. He had conveyed that India will henceforth give "special consideration" to the Indian Origin Tamils in view of their special needs and also their willingness to participate in Sri Lanka's governance structure, the political mainstream as it were.ⁱ However, these implications of Prime Minister's reach out remained underplayed.

Coming to the most overplayed and almost clichéd part of Prime Minister's visit was the card of 'Buddhist diplomacy' to counter growing Chinese influence in this island country. Although not incorrect, but reducing the visit as an attempt to counter China was not the central aspect of PM's diplomacy. There's no two opinion about Buddhism being an integral facet of the shared religious heritage of this subcontinent and has therefore been a part of India's diplomacy since 1950s. Pandit Nehru's deep reverence for Buddha and Dhamma reverberated in India and Lanka alike. His personal visit to Anuradhapura and upfront support for commemorating 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's parinirvanain Sri Lanka stands testimony to this. But the momentum was lost in the course of time largely because of the mammoth amount of developmental concerns that India had to cater to on domestic front and security challenges on the external front.

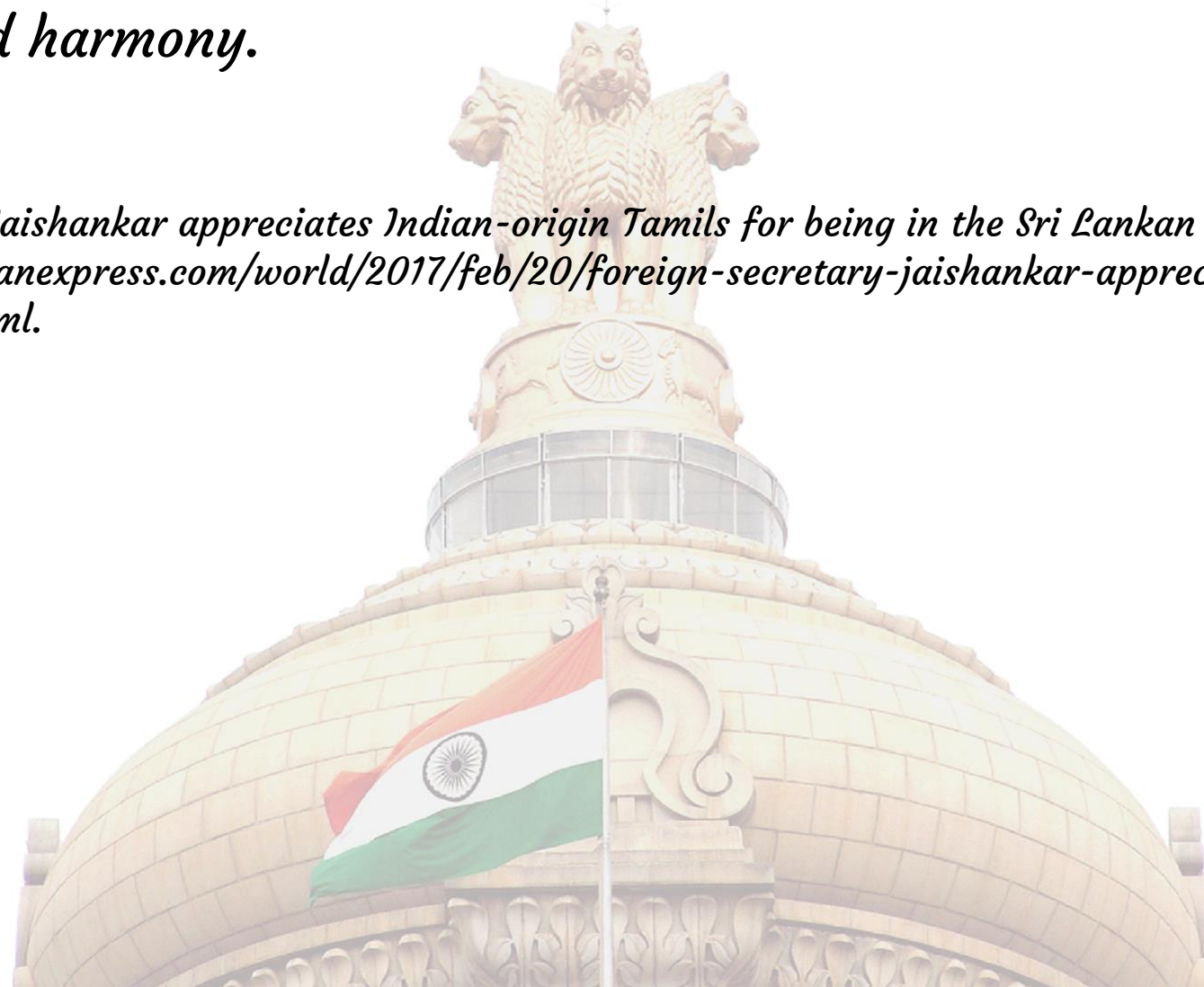
Now in the present times, it is very natural to reinvigorate old ties when India is poised to re-emerge on global panorama and Sri Lanka is on path of reconciliation. In fact, the efforts initiated by Dr.



Manmohan Singh government are being taken to a new pedestal by Prime Minister Modi, who has made India's Buddhist heritage an integral part of his international engagement. This also is congruous with Modi's own religiosity, so when he worshiped at the sacred Dalada Malligawa temple in Kandy, it carried more conviction that went beyond mere symbolism. Most importantly, religion can go a long way in reshaping many ultra-national Lankan's perception of India - from a 'regional bully' to a Buddhist friend. This went far beyond the previous narratives of Indian government that centered on historical and cultural connect with Tamils and thus inadvertently not tending to over 70 percent of Sri Lanka's Buddhist population.

The present political dispositions in India and Sri Lanka are trying to move past the times of flesh in the thorn to build a qualitative bilateral relationship. It is in this context that celebrating hitherto sidelined common religious heritage assumes importance than just providing deterrent to an expansionist neighbour's growing presence. PM's visit has subtly conveyed that India's relations with her neighbours have their own standing, dynamics and need not be seen solely through the prism of other players. And above all, instead of using religion to terrify and subjugate people, it's certainly a sensible idea to promote it to cultivate the consciousness of world peace and harmony.

- i. P.K. Balachandran, 'Foreign Secretary Jaishankar appreciates Indian-origin Tamils for being in the Sri Lankan mainstream', *The New Indian Express*, February 20, 2017. <http://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2017/feb/20/foreign-secretary-jaishankar-appreciates-indian-origin-tamils-for-being-in-the-sri-lankan-mainstream-1572759.html>.



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