

# ISAS Insights

No. 270 – 30 October 2014

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## Sri Lanka and Europe: Then and Now

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Sri Lanka, earlier called Ceylon, has been part and parcel of the South Asian sub-continental ethos for thousands of years. It dates back to the epic *Ramayana* when it was said to be the Kingdom of Ravana who was alleged to have been the abductor of the saintly Sita, the wife of the god-king Rama (Revisionist history now tends to take a more benign view of the Lankan monarch, doubtless coloured somewhat by contemporary religious-ethnic politics). Among the Europeans, the Portuguese were the first to arrive on the Lankan shores, founding Colombo in 1517. The Sinhalese soon moved their capital to the more secure Kandy. Their King in 1638 invited in the Dutch to supplant the Portuguese. This the Dutch accomplished. They also founded the ‘Dutch East India Company’, mostly manned by their legacy of the mixed race they left behind, the Eurasian *Burghers*. Apprehensive during the French control of the Netherlands at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, and in line with a burgeoning interest in sub-continental India, the British moved in. In 1803 they occupied Kandy, and snuffed out Lankan independence.

The British introduced tea to Ceylon, imported indentured Tamil and Telugu workers from southern India in large numbers, and slowly introduced universal adult suffrage, somewhat to

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the chagrin of the elites among the Sinhalese, Tamil (Jaffna), and Burgher communities. Eventually an independence movement followed amidst a growing Tamil-Sinhala split (the beginning of what was later to become a most deadly ethnic strife). Ceylon had become a Dominion on 4 February 1948. The following year it achieved full independence with D S Senanayake as Prime Minister. In 1972 the name of the country was changed to Sri Lanka, a Sinhalese initiative.

The Ceylonese have been going to Britain, the old colonial mother-country, for generations. About half a million are said to live there. Overwhelmingly they are Tamils. Indeed today over three million Sri Lankans live abroad, also mostly Tamils. European legislators of Sri Lankan origin, such as Nirj Deva<sup>2</sup>, have played an important role in Sri Lankan European relationship. There have been many visits at high levels between Colombo and European capitals. One European country, though not a member of the European Union, Norway, had sought to contribute in a significant way towards calming the Sri Lankan civil war.

Literary and intellectual contacts date back to the British era and continue to this day. The author Leonard Woolf, husband of Virginia Woolf, (both of the Bloomsbury Group of writers) lived and wrote as a district officer in Ceylon. In contemporary times, Romesh Gunasekara and Shehan Karunatilaka have made significant contribution to English literature.

## **Trade and Economic Ties**

Formal relations between Sri Lanka and the EU commenced in 1962. Though initially the EU Commission covered Sri Lanka from New Delhi, it opened its office in Colombo in September 1995. Earlier an 'Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation' was signed in July 1975, and subsequently economic relations have been governed by a 'third generation agreement' that came into force on 1 April 1975. The Sri Lankan-EU Joint Commission has met a number of times with a view to ensuring proper implementation of agreements, and examining ways and means of enhancing cooperation. The Sri Lankan government succeeded

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<sup>2</sup> Nirj Deva, also contested for the office of Secretary General of the United Nations, but not as a candidate from either the UK, or Sri Lanka, but as a nominee of Fiji, demonstrating the widespread influence of some of these South Asian diaspora members.

in its endeavours to get the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) listed by the EU in May 2006 as a ‘terrorist entity’. Dialogues with the EU on ‘The Fight against Terrorism’ were held in parallel with the Commission meetings. This is not to say the Europeans did not have considerable reservations about the manner in which the Sri Lankan government brought the civil war to a close, alleging “excessive force”.

Since 1971 Sri Lanka had been a beneficiary of the EU’s Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) scheme offering trade benefits. These benefits were expanded, and tariffs reduced to a minimum by the EU, in the aftermath of the Tsunami in 2005 when Sri Lanka was accorded the ‘GSP plus’ status as was the case, later down the line, with Pakistan. But within three years the EU threatened to terminate this status if Sri Lanka did not cooperate with the “investigations” in connection with alleged human rights violation in the civil war. President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s government firmly refused, and following adverse recommendation of the investigations, the EU temporarily suspended the ‘GSP plus’ facility on 31 August 2010.

The investigations relied on reports by the UN Special Rapporteurs and Representatives, other UN bodies and by human rights NGOs. These identified significant shortcomings in Sri Lanka’s implementation of, specifically, three human rights conventions: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention against Torture, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Nevertheless trade and investments continued to flow both ways substantially. Sri Lanka continued to enjoy the earlier ‘standard’ GSP privileges. In 2013, the total volume was over 3.5 billion Euros. Imports from Sri Lanka into the EU amounted to Euros 2.3 billion and exports, Euros 1.2 billion. 36% of Sri Lanka’s total exports go to European destinations, more than 50% of which comprise textile and clothing and the rest, machinery, rubber-based goods, jewellery and agricultural products, whereas imports are mostly machineries. About 40% of Sri Lanka’s total tourist arrivals are from the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden and Belgium.

The bloody civil war, which over a span of nearly two and half decades cost 80,000 to 100,000 lives, came to an end with the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009. The final days were particularly fierce. Western media was very critical of Sri Lankan army behaviour, and the British Broadcasting Corporation Channel 4 brought out a series of gory episodes, laying the blame on the Sri Lankan authorities. The government of Sri Lanka is making all possible

efforts to confront Western, in particular, European criticism, not only during the final phases of the war, but in the current times.

## **Peace Building and R2P**

Sri Lanka appeared to offer grounds for the testing of two important contemporary concepts, both endorsed by the international community at the United Nations. One is with regard to 'Peace Building'. It implies a series of measures to stabilise a post-conflict society into such equilibrium so as to prevent it from sliding back into a situation of chaos. In this respect much will depend on how the genuine grievances of the minority Tamil community are addressed, and not swept under the carpet. A good way to go about it would be to focus on the 'low hanging fruits' to start with. These are issues and complaints that may be easily remedied. 'Quick Impact Projects' or QIPS that can be easily implemented will be seen by the international and European communities as positive gestures. These would be manageable projects that could start with the delivery of welfare to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). A graduated progression along the 'four Rs' for the affected – relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction, and reconciliation- will help immensely. These will assist in the creation of the much-needed structure of confidence. The setting up of a 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission', a la South Africa, could be worth examining. A credible inquiry into the events of the final phase would have to be undertaken, though Sri Lanka is likely to resist any foreign participation in this.

A second is the concept of the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P). At one time around the spring of 2009, some Western politicians including Bernard Kouchner of France, were keen to apply it in the Sri Lankan context, but the Sri Lankans were most resistant, and in any case that phase of urgency is now over. Simply put, R2P means that it is the responsibility of every State to protect its own citizens: If the State in question is unable or unwilling to do so, then the responsibility for that would devolve on the international community which would discharge it working through the UN. The process would begin with economic support and diplomatic steps, with force to be used only as the last resort. The principle was unanimously adopted at the Summit of World Leaders at the UN in New York in 2005. Importantly, it was subject to only four situations: genocide, war-crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

The Sri Lankans would have none of this and equated any such contemplation as an erosion of sovereignty. They argued that none of the four conditions was present in Sri Lanka. However the point was made that the Sri Lankans could take advantage of any broad economic package that could comprise this ‘responsibility to protect’. But they preferred not to have anything to do with a concept that might imply that the Sri Lankan authorities were not caring enough. In any case, any Western attempt, or a European effort, to bring any element of R2P into effect, in the face of Colombo’s resistance, would have been negated by China and Russia in the UN Security Council. But nonetheless Sri Lankans should be wary that it should not be said of them what the Latin historian Tacitus had written centuries ago, that they made solitude or silence and called it peace. There is expectation in Europe, and in the world, that, now that the Sri Lankan government has won the war, it must work hard towards winning the peace. Or futurity will see this only as an Ozymandian moment that was not seized upon. It is anticipated that all concerned will remain focused on Sri Lanka, to see how the victors are able to meet the challenges resulting from the end of the conflict.

The Europeans and others are well aware of Sri Lanka’s great potentials, both economic and political, to play a positive and constructive role in the region, and in the world. In the past Sri Lankans have helped shape some of the global norms and standards we live by today. One is reminded of their effective participation in many international fora, and their contributions on those occasions. This includes the development of the idea of ‘Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace’. They have had an enormous role in global thinking, progress and stability. Europe and the world now await the re-engagement of Sri Lanka in the sculpting of the global future.

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