SRI LANKA AND SOUTH ASIA: CONNECTIONS, PERCEPTIONS AND POLICY

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This paper explores the many ways in which Sri Lankans look upon and are connected to the states of South Asia. It considers the perceptions held by different individuals and groups in Sri Lanka of the states and peoples of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It seeks to evoke certain elements of their historical relationships as these infuse their present perspectives in ways consequential to their preferences, their fears and how these in turn affect their policies.

When I was first invited to prepare a paper, I thought it somewhat inappropriate: South Asians should have been invited instead. This was particularly so since this is a meeting called to discuss the South Asian Regional Co-operation. It is essentially a family affair, and to some, no doubt, I would be seen as an interloper from far away. But then, on second thought, it occurred to me it might be of some interest to have a third party's perspective, as seen from the outside, so to speak.

It should be said at the outset that these observations are not the result of systematic analysis, or a detailed study of public opinion data or the results of survey research. Such tools of research hardly exist. They are rather observations derived from hours of listening over many years, notions captured in fleeting conversations, or even unexpected silences and things apparently better left unsaid. They emerge as a mosaic is formed, from small bits and pieces of comments and observations.
India

It should come as no surprise that India looms large over the Sri Lankan horizon. It casts so large a shadow over many minds in Sri Lanka that in my view, much more is sometimes attributed to India than is in fact appropriate. India has many different meanings for different elements of Sri Lanka's society. Indeed, the many divisions that have long characterised Sri Lankan society are reflected in the multiplicity of images of India that are held in the mind's eye of different Sri Lankans.

For many Sinhalese, India is the source, the place where "we" began. Indeed, the origin myth of the Sinhalese majority has it that their forefathers, of Aryan stock, came to Sri Lanka from the regions of northern India—from Gujarat or from Bengal, now in part from Bangladesh. In fact, many distinguished Sri Lankan Sinhalese families appear to have come from nearer to hand—from Andhra, from Madhya Pradesh or even from Maharashtra. On the other hand, for an American it seems odd that so few seem to take pride in where they came from, as if there is a cultural need to demonstrate not so much one's roots in India as much as one's distinctive Sri Lankan selfhood. To be sure, there are some devout Buddhists who go on pilgrimage to the holy sites of Bodhe Gaya, Sarnath and Lumbini, and find there a sense of spiritual or religious origins and contemporary inspiration. But they are also reminded that India rejected the heritage of the Gautama as the Muslim invasions or the Hindu revival nearly overwhelmed the gentler, less worldly faith. As such, of course, zealous Buddhist Sinhalese find here the very source and touchstone of Sri Lanka's unique role and modern national mission: to affirm and defend the faith from a presumably intruding, threatening alien world, either from across the Palk Straits or from the wider more modern world beyond. For these, India and Indianess are seen as negatives, potentials for undermining the integrity of the cultural distinctiveness that must be preserved.

For others, India was a source of inspiration in politics and public affairs. India's ethnic multiplicity required a pluralism
and political toleration there that many used to think peculiarly appropriate to a multi-ethnic Buddhist country like Ceylon. The British thought of Ceylon as a country of numerous groups—low-country Sinhalese, up-country Sinhalese, Christians of various sects, Burghers, Moors, etc., people speaking either Sinhalese or Tamil, the two principal local languages or English. The British may have exaggerated these diversities for their own purposes, it is widely believed. But still, for many, India was a reminder that great diversity could be encompassed within one polity if devolution of central authority to the appropriate local entity could be properly managed. Moreover, Sri Lanka’s mixed economy, a Fabian form of “socialism” which stressed import substitution with government sponsored industrialisation closely followed the theory of Indian policy, although Sri Lanka’s tiny domestic market imposed quite different imperatives while its welfare programme to promote education and to bring medical care to villagers far surpassed anything the Government of India could hope to mount.

India was also a model to some because of its approach to democratic politics and the struggle for independence. For Dudley Senanayake, J.R. Jayewardene and others like them who sought in the 1930s to reorganise the Ceylon National Congress along lines pioneered by Gandhi and Nehru, the Indian National Congress was a model to be followed. They attended Congress sessions and learned how to mobilise a following and channel political energies from watching these two Indian giants at work. In the end, of course, Ceylon’s leaders under the guidance of D.S. Senanayake followed a different course toward independence. They didn’t confront the British as Gandhi insisted. Instead, Senanayake and his colleagues were so helpful to the British during World War II that once India had obtained independence, London had no alternative but to grant Ceylon a Dominion status, without an independence “struggle” at all. As one unintended side effect of this approach, Ceylonese missed the toughening of national solidarity which might well have accom-
panied more vigorous contention against an opposing foreign ruler. However, it greatly simplified the road to independence, left relationships between British and Ceylonese remarkably easy afterwards and disrupted few of the economic relationships which had given Ceylon a per capita GNP twice that of India’s.

For Tamils in the north of Sri Lanka, India was something else again. Their ancestors had come from India, some as peaceful immigrants and traders, or as soldiers in the entourage of Elara who established a multi-ethnic kingdom in Annuradhapura as early as the first century B. C. Pandian and Cholan invaders from southern India in the 9th and 11th centuries were less tolerant when they conquered the city of Polonnaruwa and the highly sophisticated hydraulic civilisation that had flourished there since the beginning of our era. Following these conquests, many more had filtered over gradually as traders, religious figures, fishermen, artisans, etc. Jaffna early became their principal urban centre. To modern Ceylonese descendants of these early Tamil settlers, southern India has meant people who share a sense of cultural and religious fellow feeling and who have provided intellectual and artistic resources. Madras in particular has been a place to which to send children for advanced training in certain fields in universities larger and more varied than have been available in Sri Lanka. Classical Indian dance could be learned there. Over the years, money could be had there for one’s business enterprises, sometimes more easily than in Ceylon’s more narrowly based economy where the British held a more inclusive near monopoly. For the more devout, Hindu temples at Madurai and Rameswaram were places of regular pilgrimage; sometimes successive generations would find inspiration and strength from visitations to a particular temple at critical moments in a family’s fortunes or at times of major steps such as marriages or burials.

There was, however, another side to the Tamil views of India. Jaffna Tamils were persuaded they had evolved a rather special form of Tamil culture which many averred was a purer, more classical form than that of Madras. Too many influences from northern
India had inevitably penetrated southward into Tamilnad, the argument went; here on the island, by contrast, protected by the twenty-five miles of water in the Palk Strait. Jaffna Tamils had retained and indeed perfected the best of Tamil language and culture. This conviction gave to many educated Jaffna young men and women an unusual quality of self-confidence and distinctiveness. Whether they lived in Jaffna, in other parts of Ceylon where over half the indigenous Tamils lived, in Malaysia or beyond, it gave a special energy to their activities and a commitment to preserve their status and those special cultural qualities, even at considerable cost.

Another component of Sri Lankan people, the “Indian” estate workers, saw India in still another light. They were brought to Ceylon by the British in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to man the tea and rubber estates then being opened up. They came in work gangs, usually as single men originally, and eventually went back to the towns and villages they came from to select their wives. Often they went “home” for an annual vacation or if they survived to retire. There was thus an annual ebb and flow of people back and forth. As the generations passed, of course, the sense of India as “home” gradually diminished, and more and more came to feel themselves as belonging only in the hill country of Ceylon. The existence of over a million such men and women was to bedevil relations between India and Ceylon for the first three decades after Independence. Colombo considered them to be Indians but the government in New Delhi was hardly prepared to accept them all as Indian citizens. Successive negotiations were hard bargained before arrangements were reached allocating to each country a substantial number of citizens to be adopted, leaving some 93,000 stateless still unsponsored.

In short, thus far we have seen that different elements of the society looked upon India in quite different ways. Those in charge of Ceylon’s foreign policy also had differing views. D.S. Senanayake, for one, the father of Ceylon’s independence, was
worried about India, that huge, numerous and multiplying country, only 25 miles away. He professed to have few doubts about Mr. Nehru’s sincerity; but how could one know about his successors? Nehru himself had once mentioned a federation or confederation; K.M. Panikkar, the distinguished Indian historian and diplomat, had once written about Ceylon’s central role in India’s defense of the Indian Ocean, since during colonial times it had been a key defense position for the Portuguese, the Dutch and then the British. Would not India, hoping to inherit the British standing of preeminence in the region, seek special influence in Colombo or in Trincomalee? From what statesmen say in public, it is often difficult to distinguish genuine personal judgements from arguments deemed useful for the sake of political advantage. Nevertheless, D.S. Senanayake would call upon the ghosts of historical Indian invasions; he could lament the existence of concentrated Indian estate workers who were so numerous in certain constituencies in the hill country above Kandy, the country’s “heartland”, as to command a reliable majority. They might possibly become a “fifth column” some day. Once the representative of the Government of India was unwise enough to openly espouse their cause at election time, a mistake that Ceylonese politicians were quick to use to the long run political disadvantage of the estate workers, for shortly thereafter their franchise was taken away.

In Colombo in the mid-1960s, it was widely thought that D.S. Senanayake had willingly invited the British military to stay on, not only to make it easier for the British authorities to grant Dominion status, but also as a reliable and inexpensive counterweight to a possible threat from India. That D. S. Senanayake had read Kautiliya was doubtful; the Senanyakes had a reputation for not reading very much. But it was not farfetched to assume that as an experienced political leader, he appreciated the advantages to his small country, so deep in the shadow of its large neighbour, of having a security connection with a large though distant power presumably capable nevertheless of coming to its assistance should the large neighbour be tempted to swing its full weight.
D. S. Senanayake was generally careful in his public statements. His successor Sir John Kotelawala was more outspoken. He didn't even mind publicly annoying Nehru, as he did at Bandung when he spoke sympathetically of Pakistan's right to have alliances despite Nehru's criticism of all alliances. And more than once he openly made common cause with Pakistan, whose diplomatic and political opposition to Indian influences had already been underlined by the first Indo-Pakistan war.

Kotelawala's successor, Bandaranaike took a different position. He requested the British to withdraw their forces from the facilities in Trincomalee and Negombo. He also vigorously adopted Nehru's "non-alignment", which to him meant, he said, following the Buddhist "middle path" between the contending power blocs. From 1956 forward, all Sri Lankan Prime Ministers found themselves working closely with the Indians at the Unitem Nations and in the Group of 77 more generally and were prominent spokesmen for the Third World. India and Sri Lanka might differ on specific issues; the estate workers remained a nagging problem, and later on into the 70s, as off-shore oil became a precious potential, they had tough bargaining over the tiny island of Katchitivu lying between them. They often were able to set aside such differences, however, as they and others of the Group of 77 collaborated on Third World issues and made common cause against the "establishment" of the North.

Personalities, however, would also make a difference. For example, Mrs. Bandaranaike and Mrs. Gandhi developed a close working relationship and personal friendship. To be sure, they both shared the ambition - and the problems - of seeking to ensure a political future for their sons. Both, in different ways, were beset by the political constraints imposed by economic cramp. In 1971 Mrs. Bandaranaike's government had been challenged by a youth rebellion which led to attacks in one night on 70 police stations and the arrest of 14,000 young people. Her appeals for help brought assistance from all sides—the Soviet Union, the United States, China, India and Pakistan. Indeed, no other small
state faced with a domestic challenge has received assistance from such a wide range of friends. India sent by air a military unit that quickly guarded the country's major airports, and naval vessels patrolled the sea lanes around the island. The promptness and effectiveness of the Indian response was appreciated at the time. But to show how large powers near small ones hardly ever can do exactly right, on second thought, the worriers soon began to wonder how that capability might be used under slightly different circumstances.

That Mrs. Bandaranaike was not about to forego Sri Lanka’s independence out of her friendship for Mrs. Gandhi was made abundantly clear later in the year when Pakistan’s ill-fated effort to quash a secessionist movement in the then East Pakistan led to a war of national liberation against Islamabad’s rule, which was subsequently supported by the Indian army. Mrs. Gandhi held that Sri Lanka’s willingness to allow Pakistani troops carrying planes and ships to use Colombo airfields and ports was unneutral of the small neighbour. But the practice continued until Pakistani forces were defeated. This demonstration of Indian readiness to use military power against its neighbour reminded Sri Lankans once more of the contrast in size and military capability between the two.

The two Prime Ministers continued close and friendly consultations, however, and it was a considerable disappointment to Mrs. Bandaranaike - and a portent of things to come - that Mrs. Gandhi lost her election in late 1976, a defeat some Sri Lankans correctly thought presaged a similar fate for Mrs. Bandaranaike in 1977.

Many Sri Lankans carefully watched Delhi’s approach to other small neighbours in an effort to assess likely Indian policy over the long run toward Sri Lanka. They had noted India’s absorption of Sikkim under Mrs. Gandhi, the Government’s unreadiness to negotiate jointly with Bangladesh and Nepal on issues of the eastern rivers although all three states shared the same enormous and critical watershed, and other anomalies which suggested to India’s smaller neighbours that New Delhi preferred to seek to com-
mand rather than to consult in cooperation. That tone and style make a difference was soon apparent as Prime Minister Morarji Desai's government dealt with its small neighbours in a different way. Sri Lankan leaders made no bones about the fact that they found Morarji Desai's India a more comfortable neighbour than the more imperious Mrs. Gandhi's.

It was, however, hardly a question of style which in the early 1980s led to a sharp worsening of relations between Colombo and New Delhi as ethnic relations worsened between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority within Sri Lanka. Indeed, the peculiar ethnic structure of most South Asian states links these states together in usual - and intractable - ways. The fact that historical ethnic interconnections persist today, even in attenuated form, lends special complications to their relationships. A neighbour's ethnic or other difficulties may spill over across frontiers and have a profound affect on one's own domestic politics.

This is not the place to recount the tragic tale of Sinhalese-Tamil relations in Sri Lanka. Substantial studies are now appearing. One should, however, note the close correlation between contracting opportunity for Sri Lankan Tamils within Sri Lanka and their tendency to seek closer relations with Tamilnad. In one of those historical ironies, the worst fears of the Sinhalese enthusiasts have been intensified by the Tamil reaction to Sinhalese efforts to protect opportunity for Sinhalese young people. Between 1970 and 1977, during Mrs. Bandaranaike's second Prime Ministership, for instance, her government sought to ensure adequate opportunity for newly educated Sinhalese village boys by setting strict quotas for access to university openings by students from urban centres. This worked to the disadvantage of city-educated Sinhalese and particularly of young Tamils, for whom high educational achievement had been for decades the major road to opportunity. Tamil parents, desperate to sustain the educational level of their young men, and the young men themselves, increasingly looked to Madras and Tamilnad for alternative training as more and more young Sri Lankan Tamils sought
entry to universities in Madras. As personal security in the Jaffna peninsula became less sure, either because of growing boldness on the part of young Tamil “militants terrorists” or the indiscipline of the Sri Lankan army, more and more sought refuge in Tamilnad. And as increasing numbers became involved in more militant activism, they sought more and more support for their activities in the Madras area. And as more adults as well as young people sought personal security in Tamilnad, refugee camps were established, which then became centres for the organisation of further opposition to the Colombo government. It is likely that tales of “training camps” evoking images of disciplined preparations for protracted military campaigns were exaggerated.

Politically sophisticated Sri Lankans understood that in the run up to the Lok Sabha elections of January 1985, New Delhi could hardly be expected to bear down hard on its Tamil citizens. Still, many found it hard to believe that there was nothing more the Government of India could have done to inhibit the movement of arms or to discourage the public support and official facilities provided to the “Tamil Tigers” in Tamilnad. Moreover, as the young “militants terrorists” in Jaffna or Madras demanded secession from Colombo, the deepest atavistic fears of the Sinhalese majority were enlivened to be easily stirred by anyone seeking to win political approval among the Sinhalese.

As a result of these developments, it seems likely that for most Sinhalese, India is now perceived as a far more threatening neighbour than at any time since independence, awakening primordial fears that the Indian giant may finally bestir itself to overwhelm its smaller neighbour. In such ways do the ethnic and electoral politics of any one of these countries—normally considered to be exclusively domestic political affairs—impose constraints on their ability to sustain steady and friendly relations with their neighbours.

Thus, as we have seen, individuals, policies and circumstances have affected the way Sri Lankans have perceived and assessed
the government and people of India, Sri Lanka's most important neighbour.

Pakistan

Understandably, Sri Lankan perspectives on Pakistan are of a quite different order. For one thing, Pakistan seems far away and rather alien in some ways. After all, in effect it is separated from Sri Lanka by India; in effect, it lies on the farther side of India's Punjab and Haryana, which themselves seem a world away from Colombo. Pakistan's very diversity leads to a somewhat confused image. Pakistan is a land of wide spaces and hi-tech farming in the Punjab, of rugged, arid mountains and elemental tribal people still in a state of quasi-war with each other in the never truly administered rugged Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan. And until the independence of Bangladesh, there were the Bengalis, so very different in style, in character and in interest. Moreover, unlike Sri Lanka, with its established experience of orderly, democratic practice, Pakistan's inability to establish a constitutional order for over thirty-five years after independence has led many to wonder just what sort of polity Pakistan would become.

No wonder, then, that Pakistan, too, was perceived differently by different Sri Lankan leaders. D. S. Senanayake and Sir John Kotelawala, it would be fair to say, were sympathetic to Pakistan's sense of insecurity; they both appeared to feel that India might be tempted to assert its influence over its smaller neighbours if it could safely do so. They therefore saw Pakistan's security arrangements in the 1950s as quite reasonable, and incidentally quite consistent with Colombo's arrangements with London. And the stronger Pakistan could be, the less likely would India be adventuresome.

For Mr. Bandaranaike the matter was a bit more complicated. His approval of non-alignment and his efforts to encourage formerly colonial countries to work together to assert their inde-
pendence of their "colonial masters" logically enough led him to reduce Ceylon’s links to the British. It would not have been unreasonable to expect him to roundly criticise Pakistan’s security arrangements with Washington. On the other hand, he rarely openly criticised Pakistan’s alliance policies. Dudley Senanayake generally avoided commenting on the domestic or foreign policies of his neighbours. For her part, Mrs. Bandaranaike collaborated with Prime Minister Bhutto on Group of 77 matters, although her personal relationship with Mrs. Gandhi led her to be more understanding of New Delhi’s view where India and Pakistan differed.

India’s role in supporting the liberation struggle of Bangladesh intensified Sri Lankan anxieties at the time. To be sure, many Sri Lankans were shocked by General Yahya’s harsh effort to crack down on Sheikh Mujib’s popularly elected regime in East Pakistan; and they understood the special problems posed to public order in the Calcutta area and to the well-being of India’s Bengalis when some 6 million refugees poured in to West Bengal following Islamabad’s military initiative in March 1971. On the other hand, there were many who thought Mrs. Gandhi had acted in a high handed way by sending in the army to support Mujib’s “Mukhti Bahini”. Moreover, by ordering India’s army to cross the border into East Pakistan in a well-planned military campaign, Delhi appeared to be taking advantage of Islamabad’s troubles to split India’s old opponent and cut Pakistan down to half its size. The memory of that bold stroke on Delhi’s part only made still larger and more uncertain the shadow cast by India over its southern neighbour.

This would have had few short term policy consequences, however, had it not been for the worsening communal relations between Tamils and Sinhalese which led Tamil “militants terrorists” to seek refuge and succour in Tamilnad beginning in the late 1970s.
Bangladesh

Sri Lankan perceptions of Bangladesh will be dealt with more briefly. Its first significance to Sri Lanka, it seems to me, was in the way independence came, for it was Indian support for the secessionist movement which has touched the most sensitive nerves of many Sinhalese. For them, the Pandian and Chola invasions of so long ago remained more than theoretical; they came to be seen as live possibilities for the present and future. S. D. Muni has already raised the important question of how are fears intensified and then as suddenly seem to fade away. One partial explanation no doubt is competitive domestic politics. To warn of the "Indian danger" was an easy way to gain political support in Sri Lanka's highly competitive political arena. This kept the fear alive, almost regardless of what the Government of India did. Yet the fact remains that the way Bangladesh gained independence made it an effortless political gambit for those ambitious to win a following among many Sinhalese.

There were two politically consequential side effects of worsening Sinhalese-Tamil relations. For one thing, the recollection of that Indian intervention has greatly enhanced the expectations of young Tamils. They came to assume that if things got bad enough in Sri Lanka, India would feel similarly impelled to intervene to consolidate a secessionist Tamil Eelam. Sri Lankan Tamil "militants terrorists" believed their hand was strengthened by support from Tamilnad, and some even argued that the worse things got in Sri Lanka the better. Secondly, the recollection of India's boldness when Pakistan was in difficulties would be bound to complicate Colombo's response to Indian efforts to mediate between the two communities, no matter how disinterestedly intended or skillfully conducted.

One other perception deserves attention. It was, after all, the President of Bangladesh who proposed that the states of South Asia should regularly consult each other. That Mrs. Gandhi all along had preferred to deal with her smaller neighbours bilaterally and did not seem enthusiastic about meeting with the
others suggested that she feared her neighbours might "gang up" against New Delhi. For her smaller neighbours, that might be at least one justification for making the effort. But there were other better reasons, too, for consulting together. The very kind of "ethnic spillover" we have noted in the case of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka bedevils relations between other South Asian states. Insofar as the states involved in ASEAN saw virtue in consultations, there might be similar gains to be made in South Asia. No doubt there are economic and intelligence sharing gains to be made from greater economic cooperation and some forms of security cooperation.

I would like to conclude with a word of personal recollection. When I first came to Ceylon, as it then was, in the mid 1950s, I assumed from the rhetoric that the states of the region were actively seeking to consolidate what was then called "Asian solidarity". As my research proceeded, I found very little "solidarity"; rather it seemed there was mutual fear and suspicion. It is heartening to observe nearly thirty years later that the South Asian Regional Cooperation, sparked by an initiative from Bangladesh, shows signs of overcoming some, at least, of these mutual suspicions. I believe that regional consultations, if carefully nurtured and skilfully pursued, over the years can make a difference—enhancing understanding, removing small difficulties, difficulties that unattended can become large, and giving emphasis to what statesmen and peoples have in common within their own regions to help offset the alas all too natural tendency, as Kautiliya taught us, that neighbours usually make one another anxious. Good neighbours in international affairs, at least, need to consciously and carefully work at easing one another's difficulties.

**Conclusion**

In sum, this review of Sri Lankan perceptions of and policies towards its neighbours suggests that the following variables have been significant: relative size, location, and historical relationships
as mediated through traditional beliefs. Recent policies of major neighbours toward third parties are scrutinised for signs of how such neighbours might treat the self. Ethnic self-awareness and internal communal conflict can seriously complicate interstate relations since in South Asia ethnic connections often transcend national borders and the processes and strategies of domestic politics frequently intensify internal communal tensions which spill over into a neighbour's territory. Leadership styles in dealing with neighbours also make a difference. Thus, the pattern of relationships is woven into a much richer tapestry than simply parallel or compatible security perceptions, though these, too, have been at play.

Kautiliya reminds us that neighbours usually suspect each other. Hans Morgenthau argued that states have permanent, persisting interests. This paper suggests, to the contrary, that interests are defined often from perceptions that can - and do - change and that leaders can reduce suspicion if they pay sufficient attention to one another's needs and are sensitive to one another's interests as well as to their own. It is these potentials for change in South Asia's essentially negative international politics which makes worthwhile the effort to give life and substance to the discussions within SARC.