



Ramayana Trail in Sri Lanka: Some Foreign Policy implications

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Indian Policy Making considerations

India has “no permanent friends but permanent interests”. (Dixit quoting a French adage)

Policy is guided by coalition politics as well as constituent state concerns. From 1980s such a situation emerged in respect of Sri Lanka.

Pressure groups, Think-Tanks also play a role.

Policies could also change under different political alignments as much as with new governments. Hindutva ascendancy in BJP has to be seen as a reality though it has been kept down in the past.

Some Highlights-Indian tourism as a pressure point

- **B.Raman former Additional Secretary to the Indian Cabinet, now heading a Think-Tank based in Chennai suggested the use of Indian tourism as a pressure point against growing Chinese influence in Sri Lanka. It carries an ominous message capable of creating a potential volatile situation in bilateral relations especially in the light of BJP's call to elevate the Tamil issue from an ethnic to an India-wide religious(Hindu)issue.**

Policy Making & Pressure Points

- More importantly, combined with other pressure groups, Raman's thesis gives a signal about the way Indian foreign policy could evolve.
 - Some Highlights Contd.- China in focus
- The China factor in Sri Lanka had been worry-some to India from the time of independence. It originated from the British legacy over borders.

Some Highlights contd.- China in focus

- **China is in Indian perspective in a big way today since the war against LTTE terrorism. Now Hambantota is very much in focus. India wants to establish a Consulate in Hambantota.**

BJP's adversarial record on Sri Lanka Issue

- **BJP is the alternate government in India.**
- **Its stance has repercussions on foreign policy.**
- **Its representatives shared Tirumalavan's platform when he fasted over Tamil issue.**
- **BJP and Rajya Sabha MP. S.Tirunavukkaran said BJP supported "Eelam " struggle at State level and National level. He wanted India to send warships near Sri Lanka. He was putting pressure on Karunanidhi to resign. They called for anti-Sri Lanka sanctions.**
- **They speak of Tamils in terms of Hindus and openly declare they want to raise the Tamil issue to an India-wide religious issue.**

Sita Maha Temple with BJP Support

- Just 10 days back, (July 2010) BJP welcomed the “closing of UNO office” [UNDP Regional Office] ” in Colombo.
- With this anti-Sri Lankan record of the BJP how BJP’s Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivaji Singh Chauhan laid the foundation for Sita Maha temple last month (June 2010) in the heart of Sri Lanka and offered one Crore of Rupees for construction raises some questions. (Indian Express and Times of India 29 June 2010). The ‘softner’ was that it would strengthen bi-lateral ties.

Some Highlights

- **BJP's position as an extreme Hindutva-supporting party then needs no elaboration.**
- **They have been behind religious violence in Gujarat and Ayodhya where the Babri mosque was demolished by the mob. Indian Govt. could not stop it.**

The 'bhajan'

- **The Inaugural 'Bhajan' of Ramayana Trail was held in June 2010 at Cinnamon Grand with the participation of 14 Indian law makers and two Sri Lankan Cabinet Ministers.(The latter were Sinhalese Buddhists) and Deputy Minister, Vinayagamorthy Muralidaran.**

- Who were these Indian lawmakers? How is that they became interested now when not a single of them ever thought of visiting the island when it was in turmoil for over three decades?



Indian Ministers here on Ramayana Trail

Fourteen high profile Indian Ministers arrived in Sri Lanka, with a group of 150 pilgrims, on a 8-day Ramayana Trail.

This is the first time that an Indian VVIP group is in Sri Lanka

on a pilgrimage on the Ramayana Trail in Sri Lanka. The group will visit 60 legendary sites, of which 52 have already been identified as associated with the Rama-Sita-epic, said Anjalo Mendis,

Chairman, Bernard Tours and Travels (Pvt) Ltd., who brought in the Indian Ministers and pilgrims. The group was initiated by the Ashok Vatika Dhanshan Yathra Samithi of New Delhi.

Some Highlights contd.

- **Indian Cultural Centre, Colombo sponsored a coterie of people with dubious credentials to address a seminar to spread new myths on Ramayana in Sri Lanka. If not for this Indian govt's position on the Ramayana Trail affair would not have come into focus**

What does this expanding inventory of activities indicate but a growing portfolio of Indian (BJP?) sponsorship to introduce Ramayana cult in Sri Lanka?

Why the new project cannot be left alone?

- As much as the Ramayana legend/epic has served a certain didactic purpose to impart Hindu morals, as it has developed it has also generated a vicious circle of fanaticism and more seductive fundamentalism that it could disturb the harmony in the island as it did at Ayodhya. The mythology –based protest over Setu Samudram scheme is another.

Why the new project cannot be left alone?

- Tourism in general creates problems like cultural degradation, spread of disease, evangelism and conflicts.
- This is not an imaginary situation.
- Violence occur at annual pilgrimages in other countries.
- There is objection to the Sinhalese Buddhists visiting the North after the war. The Tamil Net and others raise issues over alleged activities of the Archaeological Dept., the Army and Buddhists probing on destroyed Buddhist archaeological sites in the North and the East.

Foreign policy Conflict Zones – 1.

- For BJP a Ram or Sita temple on a willing foreign soil could hardly harm. (Times of India). But B.Raman's signal that tourism could be used as pressure point against Chinese influence in Sri Lanka and BJP's agenda of trying to promote religious fanaticism by converting the protest over the Tamil issue from an ethnic to an India-wide religious issue have the potential of evolving into serious foreign policy tension area.

Foreign Policy Conflict Zones - 2.

Twining of Ramayana project with “Eelam” and “Tamil Homeland” project

- This is advanced through “Eelam/Tamil Homeland literature of Arul Arudpragasam, former EROS member, now leading propagandist for “Tamil Homelands” and “Eelam” based in Geneva; and those of others even intellectuals like the late Prof.Suriyakumaran and many others.

Twining of Ramayana Trail and “Eelam”/Home land Projects.

- **Ravana is introduced by Eelamists as a Tamil king, a Shiva worshipper who worshipped at Trincomalee and Mantota. Both claimed to be “Isvaram” cities!- pre-Buddhist, pre-Sinhalese.**
- **Ramayana Trail is then meant to perpetuate the myth and make the “Tamil Homeland” claim more ancient-based and convincing.**



Ramayana /Eelam” and Tamil Homeland” Link
“Sinhalya Modaya- Kevum kannu yodaya”

- **Tourism Development Authority’s Director General, S.Kalaiselvam may not have seen the hidden hand of ‘Eelam’ when he went all out to support the Ramayana Trail. He may have simply seen the potential to promote tourism. Or did he not?**
- **There could be arguments in favour of encouraging human contacts through tourism. Indian tourism accounted for 15 per cent of Sri Lanka’s tourist arrivals before the recent Western upsurge but the project may not be as innocuous as it appears.**

Confrontational

- But the problem is the Ramayana Trail Project presents a 100% confrontational situation to the established historical tradition, religion and norms of the country.
- See below

Why Ramayana morals are not acceptable to Sri Lanka

- The epic introduces *Samprappalapa* (falsehood) as *Samanthapasadika* and other Sri Lankan works point to.
- Arguably, some of the Ramayana morals (*Yuddha-kanda*) go against the very grain of Sri Lankan ethos.

Why Ramayana is not acceptable?

This small country applied the principle of *Ekacchatra* (cohesion/unity) This and the will of the people to defend it against greater forces and sustain itself as a nation. *Ramayana* epic sought to destabilize such cohesive political entities.

Why Ramayana is not acceptable?

- **Ramayana Trail project replaces a historical tradition (the origin story of the Sinhalese) which is now proving itself not unrelated to proto-historic evidence and the tradition of Buddha's visit with a far more mythical age of an imagined Ravana kingdom and Rama invasion. That is the claimed intention. (Kiriella)**

The negative aspects are:

- Causing dissension in (opposite) ranks (applied in Sri Lanka from 1970s onwards).
- Making heroes out of traitors to a country (Vibhishana model);



- Spreading the seductive idea of invincibility of the opponent.
- Demoralization of a people of a neighbouring land. More recently seen emphasized during the war against the LTTE.

The negative aspects contd:

- Ramayana concept of “dharma” and “adharma” is not the kettle of fish of Sinhalese Buddhists.
- Rama personifies “*Dharma*” and “Ravana,” the “*Adharma*.”
- In the 1980s India was in the forefront of the global campaign to show that “*Adharma*” prevailed in Sri Lanka in treatment of minorities.
- Now the idea has come to stay.
- However, present day Indian leadership is silent on the issue now taken up by the UN and others.

The negative aspects are:

- Buddhist concept of “*Dharma*” and “*Adharma*” was far more profound. In Buddhism, a man or woman is never discarded for ever with labels. (Angulimala, the murderer and Vimala, the former courtesan and others became virtuous Arahants).
- In contrast, in Hindu India, even today at the Dasaratha festival throughout the land, Ravana’s effigy personifying “*Adharma*” is burnt publicly. That is the difference in Hindu and Buddhist “*Dharma*” and “*Adharma*” concepts.

Ramayana was opposed in this country throughout history.

- Prof. Heinz Bechert went into this issue in detail. His view is that the Sangha stopped Ramayana getting a foothold in Sri Lanka. It was a powerful communication medium which could have caught up and spoilt the chances of Buddhist doctrine taking root. It meant that Brahmanism had no chance in Sri Lanka. The situation in South East Asia was different. The Sangha opposition had been less pronounced there. So the pre-Buddhist Ramayana layer still survive there.

Why the Ramayana epic is being introduced now?

- This is important to understand the present effort to propagate the Ramayana cult through a Tourist programme. Buddhism in this country has been a stumbling block for the spread of Brahmanism. It is so even today. Buddhism has to be diluted to remove its potency and hold on the people. Hence the attacks on *Mahavamsa*, the Bhikkus and calls of chauvinism.
- One has to see behind the agenda of promoters of Ramayana Trail both here and India.
- The “*bhumi Puja*” of the Sita Maha Temple was carried out under disguise!

Is the timing important?

- It is a weak moment for Sri Lanka. There are many external pressures on the country even though the war against LTTE has been won. It is the time to strike-to open a new front.
- There is pressure from America to open the country to evangelism, faith healing and what-not. I see the Ramayana Trail as something complementary to the evangelic enterprise intended to break up the Buddhist hold.
- You break the Buddhist hold in the country, then the it is an open field serving vital [political] interests of others. Buddhism was removed from Japan after WWII by General Mac Arthur. Bathism was removed from Iraq after the war in Iraq.
- BJP's position that it is taking up the Tamil problem as a "Hindu" problem to get response from the whole nation. This is the agenda behind temple expansion which has to be feared.

Indian Cultural imperialism

- This aspect can be best illustrated by the spread of Ramayana tradition throughout India and the whole of South East Asia. This phase of the spread of Brahmanism is a reality. You saw how it spread in old Champa and the neighbourhood



Ram Leela

Indian Cultural imperialism

- The pressure on Sri Lanka is not new. It has existed all along, the greater force of Hinduism wanting to oust Buddhism out of the country. Agastya, the Aryan Brahmin, the patron saint of Tamils, could not be the progenitor of the Sri Lankan population as was done in South East Asia but there were attempts to identify Samantakuta as Agastya's abode. The scholarly attempt to identify Polonnaruwa colossus as Agastya met with little support but now the new Ramayana Trail introduces it to the world as Pulasthi.

Indian Cultural imperialism

- Sri Lanka evaded this Brahmanic pressure for over two millennia but the new Hindutva fundamentalism is posing a challenge to the old traditions and established major belief system in the country which is Buddhism.
- The BJP interest behind the new Sita Maha Temple was discussed earlier. This is the real challenge of the Ramayana Trail.

Hegemonic intention



- **Historically, political hegemonic influences followed cultural expansion. By the 10th to 11th century A.D. Colas were politically dominating the seas of South East Asia.**

Example of Konesaram -Trincomalee.

- Temples were the centres through which political power was spread from the Cola days. Revival of Konesaram in 1960s, a Buddhist temple destroyed by the Portuguese (Queyroz) is a present day example. Trincomalee was thereafter declared the Capital of “ Eelam” thr’ Vadukkodai Resolution.
- India pressed for amalgamation of the North and the East with Trinco in view. Rajiv-Jayewardene Accord confirmed it. A client state with Perumal established
- supported by a Tamil National Army.

Koneswaram Temple built in 1950/1960s

Buddhist Temples in the 17th century(Queyroz)



No Indian state involvement In Ramayana Project

- It is not suggested that New Delhi is engaged in a programme of Ramayana Trail on Sri Lankan soil as an instrument to gain hegemonic/ other interests but the project contains trappings of interested parties looking for opportunities to create a situation that did not exist for over two millennia.
- Nor would the present Indian govt. be expected to oppose such an enterprise. It has been advancing the idea of pluralism, multi-culturalism in Sri Lanka.
- The foremost place given to Buddhism while guaranteeing freedom of religion may run counter to such an idea but that is to forget Lutheran religion is official religion of Britain and of other countries.

Is a New India concept in making?

- Though Indian Govt. support may not appear explicit despite Indian Cultural Centre's involvement in advancing Ravana/Sita myth, the all pervading scenario lends support to the idea of an emerging all pervading India Power concept .

Who are the interested parties then?

- We have discussed the various forces behind the Ramayana Trail project. Now it has advanced to a Temple project.
- There were threats to come in flotillas full of South Indians to join LTTE ranks to fight the armed forces? What repercussions will there be once the Ramayana Trail takes a foot-hold and if an all-India Hindu cry could be raised against Sri Lanka? Can one reject these as mere empty rhetoric? Jihadis from other lands are fighting in Afghanistan on the side of Taliban.
- The Indian government could not stop the demolition of Babri mosque.

Ramayana is a forceful Communication medium

- Its power as a communication media is intact as it was over two millennia ago. In place of the old style bards singing the story from city squares today the audio visual media has become the principal tool of communication.
- Combined with Hindutva fanaticism its destabilizing potential of spreading Hindu moral values and promoting fanaticism are mind boggling. BJP claims it wants to make the Tamil issue a Hindu issue to mobilise the whole of India. This has serious ramifications.

The TV was the major tool in introducing the Ramayana Trail in Sri Lanka

- **A certain TV station was the pioneer in re-introducing the Ramayana epic to the island a few years ago.**
- **It may have been seen as simple entertainment but it is the “message” that it embodies which is important, significantly, the “unacceptable” morals referred to at the beginning. We all watched gleefully not realizing that grass was being cut under our own feet!**

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- **The cable TV channel “Heritage TV” is now following with Ramayana Trail news.**
 - **The Tourism Development Authority has become a partner in disinformation encouraging writing about Ramayana ideology which is opposed to that of Buddhism and composing local myths**

- Who are then the present day Valmikis who are behind this new Sri Lanka “Kanda” of the Ramayana?



Some Concluding Thoughts

The Ramayana Trail project may look innocuous at present.

The problem lies not in the yarns which have been spun around the Ramayana story which are not part of the epic but in the rise of new temples which could lead to controversy and even violence which could take serious proportions like the Indian fishermen's problem.

That could give rise to foreign policy issues.

Presence of Indian Nepali businessmen in Tibet was made an issue by India to intervene in Tibet.

Some Concluding Thoughts contd.

- **Temples attract many unwanted people. Way back in 1960s the Ramakrishna Madam at Kataragama was a centre promoting illicit immigration. The Madam had to be demolished.**
- **BJP's efforts to convert the Tamil issue to an India-wide Hindu issue is as ominous as the claim of ethnic affinity with Sri Lankan Tamil which was the ground on which the Indian government intervened in Sri Lanka in the 1980s and which still continues to exert pressure on Sri Lanka's internal affairs.**



Thank You