

“Sri Lanka and its relations with India in all its aspects”

It's a pleasure for me to be here today at the Bangalore International Centre. The work of this Centre as a hub of cultural and intellectual activities, assessing and assimilating global influences, and reaching out to the world at large, is important in the context of India's rise on the world stage. I represent a country that appreciates India's responsible role in interacting with her neighbours to usher peace and tranquillity as well as sustainable development in the South Asian region. I am happy therefore, to talk to you today about “Sri Lanka and its relations with India in all its aspects”.

As you all know, relations between India and Sri Lanka are ancient and predate the modern State system. Bonds between our peoples, our kings and our rulers are even older than recorded history.

However, the long years of colonial rule, the travails of freedom struggles and Independence, and the efforts thereafter to govern in the modern Nation State System while dealing with several complications inherited from colonial rule, resulted in the blurring of the ties that bound the people of our two countries in the ancient past.

Today, with the end of terrorism that plagued Sri Lanka for 30 years, and the rise of India on the world stage, we have a historic opportunity to once again renew our traditional friendships, especially with the Southern States of India, and restore our age-old ties. My visit to Bangaluru and the recent appointment of an Honorary Consul for Sri Lanka in this city are manifestations of Sri Lanka's interest to establish greater links with Karnataka, the land of the Kannadigas.

While Karnataka projects itself to the world as “One State, Many Worlds”, Sri Lanka presents itself to the world as “A Land Like No Other”. Both Sri Lanka and Karnataka are heirs to a rich history as well as culture and traditions which I believe, makes it easier for our people to relate to each other and understand each other better.

In this context, let me set before you very briefly, certain aspects of Sri Lanka’s history and socio-economic development which will help you understand the evolution of relations between India and Sri Lanka.

A strong influence on Sri Lanka’s history right throughout, for thousands of years, has been her position in the Indian Ocean, namely, her strategic location: an island, located midway between East and West. For over 2000 years before the advent of the colonial powers, Sri Lanka served as a safe and important entrepôt, providing ports for the exchange of goods between East and West; a contact point between two great regions.

Sri Lanka, since time immemorial, has seen the continual absorption of influences from the outside world. This is evident in the multilayered make up of the population, its manners, its traditions, culture, architecture, food and attire. But, throughout history, the people of Sri Lanka have displayed a resistance to attempts at physical conquest. Being separated from India by just 30 miles, a narrow strip of Sea, Sri Lanka has been close enough to India to be influenced throughout history, but remained fiercely independent so as to preserve a distinct individuality.

The history of Sri Lanka from the 3rd Century BC onwards is one of the best documented in the region. The island has a collection of historical chronicles and religious writings which have no parallel in South Asia. Recorded history begins over 2300 years ago when Emperor Asoka of India sent his son and daughter to Sri Lanka. They set out to Sri Lanka from Sanchi and were received in Sri Lanka’s ancient Kingdom of Anuradhapura. A sapling of the Pipal tree under which Prince Siddhartha attained enlightenment as Gautama Buddha in Bodhgaya, was taken to Sri Lanka by Emperor Asoka’s daughter. That tree continues to stand in Anuradhapura even today and it is acknowledged as the oldest recorded tree in the world. It has remained in continuous worship since its inception in the 3rd Century BC. For nearly 13 centuries, Anuradhapura remained the principal seat of government and the major centre of Sri Lankan culture and civilisation. Its monasteries were great centres of learning, visited by scholars and pilgrims from many parts of Asia. It housed an international trading community, which included

traders from India, China, Rome, Arabia and Persia. It was from the court at Anuradhapura that Sri Lankan ambassadors were despatched on several occasions to the imperial courts of Rome and China. The Great Indian Buddhist scholar and commentator, Buddhaghosa, spent many years in Anuradhapura during the 5th Century, codifying the Buddhist scriptures which had been lost in India. Gunavarman, the Kashmiri monk, who carried Buddhism to Indonesia and China, passed through Sri Lanka. Monks from Anuradhapura went out to many lands, such as India, China, Cambodia and Java, and left inscriptions and records of their visits in those places that they visited.

Influences from southern India have been of fundamental importance from prehistoric times. For a thousand years before the arrival of the Portuguese, successive waves of Hindu conquerors from South India invaded parts of Sri Lanka and established dependencies. At the same time, there was a long history of Sri Lankan rulers sending emissaries to Southern India for their queens. There were at the time, substantial economic, social and cultural interactions with the southern region of India. The cross pollination of ideas, traditions and skills took place as a result. In fact, the Buddhist temples from the Polonnaruwa period onwards incorporated Hindu shrines in their premises. This is a feature one would find in Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka even today.

During much of the historic period, there are descriptions of the island: in the Hindu epics, in accounts of early Chinese Buddhist travellers, in the works of the Greek, Roman and Arab geographers, and eventually in the Portuguese and Dutch archives.

One of the earliest foreign records is that of a pilot in one of Alexander's fleets, who seems to have visited Sri Lanka in the 4th Century BC. In the 1st Century AD, Pliny gives a description of the country and its people, which he seems to have compiled from the accounts of Sri Lankan ambassadors to the court of Emperor Claudius. Some of the most accurate accounts are considered to be by the Chinese Pilgrim Scholar, Fa-Hsien, who visited Sri Lanka in 5th Century to visit the Buddhist monasteries which by that time had become great centres of learning. The beauty and wealth of the Island had caught the imagination of Arab writers to such an extent that the land they referred to as 'Serendib' was incorporated into the stories of Sinbad the Sailor. They believed that Adam lived there when he was exiled from Paradise. Even today, a cone-shaped Mountain in Sri Lanka, which has at its Summit, a depression resembling a foot print, is considered by the Muslims as Adam's. The same footprint is venerated by Buddhists as that of the Buddha; by Hindus as that of Shiva; and by Christians as that of St. Thomas the Apostle.

It is also said of Sri Lanka that 'there is probably no place that occurs so frequently or is so correctly situated on ancient maps'. Perhaps nothing conveys this so graphically as the map of the world by Ptolemy, the Egyptian geographer of the 2nd Century AD. There, Sri Lanka,

referred to as Taprobane, appears about 20 times its actual size, dominating the twin arcs of the Indian Ocean formed by the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.

All this stands testimony to the fact that Sri Lanka was not only a rich and beautiful Island but that it was also the seat of one of the small but important historical civilisations of Asia. Historians of science have placed the Sri Lankan builders amongst the great hydraulic engineers of the pre-modern world, on a level with those of ancient Egypt and China. The scale of their achievement can be measured when one considers that in the 12th Century, there were 600 miles of man-made canals in an island that is less than 300 miles long. The ruins of great monasteries and cities, colossal man-made lakes, numerous inscriptions and a large body of ancient literature still survive as testimony to the achievements of the Sri Lankan people over a period of 2000 years and more. They indicate that from about 3rd century BC to about the 15th century, Sri Lanka took its place with other countries in Asia, as one of the most advanced and developed countries of the pre-modern world.

With the beginning of the modern era and the world began to change and enter upon a new historical stage, Sri Lanka was compelled into forming new relationships with powers from overseas, particularly, the Europe of the Renaissance. The colonial expansion of the European maritime nations had a direct political, economic and cultural impact on Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan people were outmanoeuvred by successive waves of Portuguese, Dutch and British colonisers armed with military power and aggressive economic and diplomatic strategies of a rising Europe. The country remained a British colony for 150 years until Independence in 1948.

The process of transformation of Sri Lanka into a modern nation with modern institutions took place under colonial domination.

Modern constitutional governance in Sri Lanka commenced in 1833, during the time of the British. At first, Restricted Legislative Assemblies were established. In due time, they were enlarged until, in 1931, the people of Sri Lanka received Universal Adult Franchise. In keeping with the British system of governance, a strong Bar and an independent Judiciary developed in the country. The Parliament was established with the advent of Independence in 1948 and the Constitution modelled along the Westminster model of government, was adopted. This was not an end in itself. There were two major benchmarks in our constitutional evolution. In 1972 we became a Republic and in 1978 we broke away from the Westminster model, directly electing a Head of State with executive powers. Although practicing democracy has been firmly established, the process of finding the perfect constitutional model for the empowerment of people encompassing all communities of the country still continues.

For 30 long years, since the late 1970s, democracy in the country was under siege. A terrorist group, bent on carving out a separate State in the North and the East of the country, unleashed indescribable violence on the nation. Their aim was to convert the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society that the people of the country had enjoyed for many centuries, into a narrow, mono-ethnic, mono-linguistic State. The ruthless methods they used included the deployment of child soldiers and suicide bombers. They killed a Prime Minister of India, a President of Sri Lanka, a Tamil Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka and many more Tamil political leaders as well as Sinhalese and Muslims. They completely destroyed the economy and the infrastructure of the North of the country while inflicting heavy damage on other parts of the country. LTTE eliminated the democratic political leadership of their own Tamil community. A large number of innocent civilians from all races became victims of their violence. This even included Muslim and Buddhist civilians at prayer in mosques and temples. The LTTE also carried out ethnic cleansing raids. All non-Tamils, including a large number of Muslims who lived in the North were evicted by the LTTE. For example, in 1989, the entire Muslim population in Mannar were asked to leave their land, and in 1990, 75,000 Muslims from Jaffna were given 2 hours to leave the Northern region. The ruthlessness of the LTTE and its intransigence resulted in its proscription by the USA, India, UK, EU and Canada.

The many attempts at bringing the LTTE into the democratic path included amending Sri Lanka's Constitution as well. This was in the form of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1987, which came into effect along with the Provincial Councils Act, to devolve power to the Provinces. Our friend and neighbour India, assisted us in this endeavour. But, as you all know, the LTTE would not accept power-sharing and was adamant on using terror tactics to achieve their goal of separation. The Provincial Councils that were set up in the country as a power sharing mechanism, however, are up and running. With the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, Local Government and Provincial Council elections which could not be held in the LTTE held areas for several decades are now being held. As a result, the people of those areas are now once again electing their own leaders at free and fair elections.

The refusal of the LTTE and their sympathizers to follow the path of the ballot and instead resort to the bullet, continuously, without respite, for 30 long years, led the Government of Sri Lanka to ultimately take resolute action to defeat the LTTE militarily, once and for all. Today, just two years after the conflict, the investment in Defence has borne results. Apart from the removal of terror from the everyday lives of the people, rapid economic growth is now evident. Inflation is down to single digit, unemployment is below 5%, fiscal deficit is down from 6.8% to 5%, malnutrition is down from 35% to 13.5% and poverty is down to 7.6% from 15.2%, the fastest reduction in the world.

With a per capita income of US\$ 2,400 in the year 2010, Sri Lanka is now categorised as a middle income country by the IMF. We have achieved an economic growth rate of over 8% and this is expected to grow even higher. Our current aim is naturally to capitalise on post-conflict opportunities for the betterment of the people of our country. We are well placed on our path towards this aim. Our workforce is educated, versatile, and easily trainable. In fact, we have the second largest pool of UK qualified accountants in the world which helps us compete in the financial and BPO markets. The Colombo stock market is one of the best performing not only in Asia, but in the world.

Sri Lanka today has a population of 21 million made up of 74% Sinhalese; 18% Tamils consisting of Tamils of recent Indian origin and Sri Lankan Tamils; 7% Muslims, and 1% made up of other groups. The main religions practiced are Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. The population growth rate is around 0.9%.

Sri Lanka's social indicators are among the best in Asia. People of Sri Lanka enjoy the highest physical quality of life in the South Asian region. Another achievement is near universal literacy with a very narrow gender gap. The World Economic Forum has rated Sri Lanka among the top 20 countries in the world on gender equality. These are the results of sound policies implemented soon after Independence to provide free healthcare and free education for all Sri Lankans.

Taking into account Sri Lanka's strategic location on the east-west maritime route, close to the ocean routes that link Asia to Europe and the rapidly expanding markets of the Indian sub-continent, our vision in terms of our overall economy, as laid down in the Government Policy Document 'Mahinda Chintana' (Vision for the Future) is to become a dynamic hub; a shipping, aviation, commercial, energy and knowledge hub, being a key link between the East and the West.

Growing trade in the Indian sub-continent and its increasing integration with the rest of the world have created demand for enhanced port facilities, giving Sri Lanka the opportunity to increase its volumes and market-share of trans-shipment traffic. In this context, Ports have been identified as one of the highest potential revenue generators for Sri Lanka. The current expansion of the Colombo Port (the Colombo South Harbour Project) and the new Port in Hambantota are expected to drive economic activity and significantly boost revenues in the years ahead. The ancient and world renowned natural harbour in Trincomalee in the East of the country is envisaged to become an industrial port. Trincomalee port will be used increasingly for commercial activities including power generation, cement production, flour milling and oil storage. The Indian Oil Corporation already operates out of Trincomalee. Shortly, NTPC, the

giant Indian State owned Power Company, will enter into a Joint Venture with the Ceylon Electricity Board to build a 1000MW coal power plant. In addition to these 3 ports there are also the ports in Galle, Oluvil and Kankasanturai. The ancient Galle Port in the South is being developed as a commercial and leisure port. The Oluvil Port which is seen as a catalyst for the growth of the eastern region is being developed as a commercial and fisheries harbour. The Kankasanturai Port in the North is currently being rebuilt with Indian assistance.

It is expected that our per capita income, would reach US\$ 4000/- by 2016. Tourist arrivals, currently growing at 40%, are expected to reach 2.5 million by 2015. IT literacy is expected to increase from the current 35% to 75%.

As mentioned earlier, our focus is to capitalise on post-conflict opportunities to ensure a better future for the people of our country. Our challenges in this respect include consolidating the hard won peace after 30 years of conflict and taking our nation as a whole towards greater prosperity and social cohesion. This involves safeguarding Sri Lanka's national interests, meeting the aspirations of its people of all communities, safeguarding our cherished and long standing democracy, and evolving as a nation at peace and a venue for secure investment and good business.

Since Independence, Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy has been guided by non-alignment. This policy is in line with our national ethos and persistent desire to be an independent nation, working with friendship towards all and enmity towards none. In this context, we enjoy close and friendly relations with all Member States of the UN. However, extra effort is made towards developing closer ties with countries in our immediate neighbourhood. India, in this respect, holds a very special place. In the words of our President, "India is our relation and all others are our friends". In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "It is, at least it should be, impossible for India and Sri Lanka to quarrel. We are the nearest neighbours. We are inheritors of a common culture." (unquote). It is on this basis that Sri Lanka looks to develop relations with India and take the India-Sri Lanka partnership forward; and it is on this basis that the two countries are working together.

Relations between Sri Lanka and India, in the post-Independence era, have matured over the years and diversified with the passage of time, encompassing all areas of contemporary relevance, including trade, services and investment, development cooperation, science and technology, culture, education, as well as security aspects. The conclusion of the armed conflict in May 2009 created the space for new opportunities and further expansion of areas of cooperation between the two countries. The State Visit by President Mahinda Rajapaksa to India in June 2010 was a landmark event that laid a strong foundation for the future development of bilateral relations, with the two leaders agreeing to harness the enormous

potential available for consolidating and strengthening the bilateral partnership. Today, India and Sri Lanka work together on the basis of mutual respect and understanding. Our relations could be described as having reached a point of irreversible excellence. Interactions take place at every conceivable level on a regular basis and all issues are discussed and resolved amicably through direct bilateral discussions.

India today is Sri Lanka's largest trading partner. India is first in terms of Foreign Direct Investment. The largest number of tourists who come into Sri Lanka are from India. In all three sectors, trade, Foreign Direct Investment, and tourism, India occupies a dominant position in relation to our economy. Trade between the two countries has increased exponentially since the entry into force of the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement in the year 2000. It is now envisaged to take this partnership further in the form of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership. The Colombo Port and the Colombo Dockyard feed on substantial Indian business. Many Indian corporations are investing in Sri Lanka. Indian banks and insurance companies operate in Sri Lanka as well. Physical connectivity between the two countries continues to expand. The Colombo-Tuticorin Ferry Service was launched recently and arrangements to launch the Rameshwaram-Talaimannar Ferry Service are currently underway. There are more than 100 flights a week between the two countries now and over 250,000 Sri Lankans visit India, annually, mostly on pilgrimage to Buddhist sites in North India.

India's assistance towards the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the conflict affected areas of the North and the East of Sri Lanka is substantial and continuing. India's contribution covers a range of areas and include; deployment of demining teams, rebuilding infrastructure including railways, setting up vocational training centres, repair and construction of 50,000 houses, rehabilitation of the Palaly Airport and Kankasanthurai Harbour, construction of a cultural centre in Jaffna.

Sri Lanka has permanent official diplomatic representation in New Delhi as well as in Mumbai and Chennai. India has expanded its diplomatic representation in Sri Lanka since the conclusion of the conflict. While the High Commission is based in Colombo, India has Consulates in Kandy in the Central Province, Jaffna in the North and Hambantota in the deep South.

Recognising India's role as an emerging power in the world, Sri Lanka was one of the first countries to pledge its support for a permanent seat for India in the UN Security Council.

There is one sensitive matter which could be termed an outstanding issue, on which the two countries remain engaged to find a solution. This is the matter of fishermen from either side crossing into each other's waters. The main issue in this regard is that of fishermen from Southern India crossing the IMBL in the Palk Bay, in large numbers, and fishing in the resource rich shallow waters off the coast of Sri Lanka. The Northern Sri Lankan fishermen who were not able to go out fishing during the long conflict period have returned to their traditional livelihood following the conclusion of the armed conflict. They now protest that their resources are being plundered by the Southern Indian fishermen crossing the IMBL. Their other concerns include the fishing methods used by the Indian fishermen which are reportedly harmful to the marine eco-system. The problem is not something that can be solved easily as it involves livelihood concerns of fishermen of both sides. But both countries recognise and acknowledge the problem and related concerns. We remain engaged at all levels including through Fishermen's Associations, to find practical solutions to the problem.

The Government of Sri Lanka, several Sri Lankan Tamil political leaders, as well as several sections of the Sri Lankan Tamil emigrants abroad, have urged all sections of the Tamil communities overseas, including those in Tamil Nadu, to contribute their collective strength, in the aftermath of the defeat of the LTTE, towards rebuilding efforts in the North of the country. This includes restoration of the livelihoods of the people in the North, rehabilitation efforts and uplifting the economy of the North. While several have joined this effort, some who primarily live in western countries and a few in Tamil Nadu as well, have rejected this call for help. They ostensibly cite human rights concerns for not assisting fellow Tamils but seek retribution for the military defeat of the LTTE. In fact, these groups work against our efforts to bring normalcy to the Northern Province. The inability or refusal of such groups to come to terms with the defeat of the LTTE and rejection of separatist ideology, seem to impact Tamil Nadu adversely. This affects negatively, the efforts by both countries to restore relations between Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu to their golden days before the conflict, and take it forward, quickly. It is our earnest desire to prevent malicious efforts by motivated parties impacting upon the existing good relations between all Southern States of India and Sri Lanka.

Neither Sri Lanka nor India can conduct its relations with each other in total isolation of the rest of the region and beyond. Hence how we relate ourselves to the rest of the world have an impact on our bilateral relations as well.

Since time immemorial, the Indian Ocean has been an important location in the strategic calculations of the great powers of the world, primarily due to the importance of the Indian Ocean sea route in the east-west maritime trade and related security concerns. Sri Lanka, located right in the middle of the Indian Ocean at a strategic location has not been immune from these strategic calculations and speculations. Think-tanks, academia and the media engage in constant speculation over these issues. Sri Lanka is determined to ensure that our soil and our

seas will not become a theatre for manifestation of power rivalry, ever. We would not allow one country to use Sri Lanka as a launching pad for hostile action against any other country. Having suffered from terrorism for 30 years, we understand well, the suffering of people and nations in times of conflict and the pain that society as a whole undergoes in such times. We will therefore continue to make all efforts to be mindful at all times and to understand and take care of the concerns of our neighbours, especially our closest neighbour and friend, India. We will always act in a manner that contributes to strategic stability in the region, securing enhanced maritime security in and around the Indian Ocean. It is in this context that we continue to enjoy very friendly relations with all Asian countries in the region; India, China, Japan, Indonesia as well as others in the far-east.

The single immediate challenge that Sri Lanka faces today is to provide a quick peace dividend to the people in the North and East of the country who were directly affected by the conflict. These are our people who were deprived of their rights for upward mobility in terms of social and economic advancement due to 30 years of conflict. Although people belonging to all communities, living everywhere in Sri Lanka, express relief and happiness that they can now live their daily lives free of terrorist violence, they are not free of grievances. The Government acknowledges this and has recognised that the military gains must be invested quickly in sustainable political and socio-economic processes. Action is already underway to respond to conflict-related grievances as well as their root causes. The process of consolidating the hard won peace through resettlement of the displaced, reconstruction and rehabilitation began immediately after the conclusion of the conflict two years ago. An independent mechanism has been established for reconciliation. This mechanism, called the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), seeks to provide restorative justice. The Commissioners have visited all the conflict affected areas and heard, first hand, the grievances of the people. The LLRC is scheduled to complete its work in November this year. In the meantime, several of the recommendations made by the LLRC in an interim Report are already being implemented through an Inter-Agency Advisory Committee (IAAC).

There are several calls from different sections of the international community, especially from the western world, for retributive justice. Calls of this nature, at a time when the people who actually live in our country and have faced the brunt of the conflict, require time and space to heal, are unhelpful at best, if not inimical to our immediate needs. The Government and the people faced a threat from within, to the sovereignty of our people and our nation. It cannot be dismissed that some of the interventions made and attempted by external actors during the three-decade long conflict, no matter how well intentioned they were, caused complications that adversely affected the lives of the innocent people, especially those in the North and the East who were trapped in the clutches of terrorists. We realise that we need to focus, without delay, on reconciliation and confidence building. These processes, in fact, have already begun but need time for fruition. But we firmly believe that we require to preserve the independence of the local mechanisms that we have established for reconciliation. The people of our nation have the confidence, that, after emerging from an injurious and costly conflict, we still retain the

strength of character and the will to introspect and take remedial measures on our own. We believe that we alone can do this, and that we alone, as a nation, must do this, if such processes are to be successful, and their effects are to be meaningful and long lasting. In this context, I must emphasise that any action that has the potential to lacerate the healing process and cause communal disharmony will not be helpful to the process of consolidating the peace. Efforts by some sections, especially those motivated by LTTE sympathisers living overseas, to push for retributive justice, in the guise of calls for accountability, are counter-productive and callous.

Sri Lanka takes its international responsibilities and obligations as well as its role in the international community of States, seriously. We have signed international treaties and other agreements, each of which require us to share with other countries and multilateral institutions, reports and rationale for some of our decisions. We believe in the need to be transparent, accountable, and reasonable. Accordingly we engage and work with member States of the UN according to established UN practice and international law. We expect reciprocity from other countries and actors on the global stage.

Sri Lanka remains committed to the ideals of the United Nations as well as regional Organisations such as SAARC. In SAARC, we recognise the lead role that India can and must play in taking forward regional cooperation objectives.

Sri Lanka remains fully committed to the global endeavour to eradicate terrorism worldwide and particularly in our region. We believe that terrorism and extremism have no place in the modern world.

As Sri Lanka once again takes its rightful place in South Asia, and on the world stage, both in terms of its economic potential and political profile, we want the world to take note of what is being accomplished in the country, against all odds, and the hand of friendship, support and understanding to be extended to our people. India has stood by Sri Lanka, a constant and consistent friend and neighbour. We intend strengthening these bonds further, focusing more and more on developing ties with the states in India, especially the southern Indian states. It is my fervent hope that the people of Karnataka will join hands with us in our onward march.

Thank you very much.

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