



MR Narayan Swamy
News Editor, IANS

India-Sri Lanka Accord Does It Still Flicker?

Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies

Twenty long years after it was signed, the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord of 29 July 1987 seems like a hazy affair, a dream gone by, one that probably never happened, considering the fact that an ethnic conflict it sought to end still rages on, with no apparent solution in sight.

It is significant that neither the Indian nor the Sri Lankan government did anything to mark the anniversary of the agreement that two decades ago was widely viewed as New Delhi's biggest diplomatic coup and of immense strategic value.

The pact followed months of intense diplomatic discussions between New Delhi and Colombo, mostly behind the scenes, after India concluded that the separatist violence in the island nation had to halt, for the sake of everyone, and a parallel political process required that would satisfy the Tamil community's legitimate political aspirations. And it had also become evident to Indian policymakers, after repeatedly trying but failing to push Colombo and the Tamil sides to make peace that this would happen only if New Delhi played a proactive, even interventionist, role in the process.

The 1987 agreement sought to address most of the concerns plaguing the Indian and Sri Lankan governments besides the Tamil community. But the bloody and complex aftermath that followed ended up pushing it to the margins of history in a manner few

anticipated. Although neither India nor Sri Lanka has officially renounced the accord, its failure to resolve the ethnic conflict underlines the complexities that continue to grip the strife-torn country, disappointing the various international actors now in the fray.

The most significant highlight of the agreement was that it brought about, for the first time, devolution of powers to the minorities in the shape of provincial councils with civil, police and judicial powers, courtesy the Thirteenth Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution and the Provincial Councils Act enacted by that country's parliament.

The Accord acknowledged in a formal sense that Sri Lanka was a multiethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious plural society (Sections 1.2 and 1.5), recognized that each ethnic group had a distinct cultural and linguistic identity that had to be carefully nurtured (1.3), and agreed that the northern and eastern provinces (the war theatre) were "areas of historical habitation of Tamil speaking peoples" (1.4). It also led to the merger of the northern and eastern provinces, again for the first time, into one administrative

It is significant that neither the Indian nor the Sri Lankan government did anything to mark the anniversary of the agreement that two decades ago was widely viewed as New Delhi's biggest diplomatic coup and of immense strategic value.

unit with an elected Provincial Council, one Governor, one Chief Minister and a Board of Ministers (2.1 and 2.2). The agreement also sought to help the thousands displaced by the conflict (mainly Tamils) to return to areas in the northeast where they once lived (2.4).

At the same time, there was to be a cessation of hostilities within 48 hours after the signing of the accord and a surrender of all arms held by Tamil militants within 72 hours along with the confinement of Sri Lanka's army and other security personnel in their barracks as they were on 25 May 1987 (2.9). Sri Lanka agreed to abide by the provisions of the Accord (2.12) and India pledged to guarantee and underwrite the resolutions (2.14). New Delhi also promised not to allow its territory to be used by Tamil militants (2.16, a) and

Over the years, the LTTE has taken most of the blame for the failure of the Accord, a development that led to a military showdown between the Tigers and the Indian military causing misery to innocents. Nevertheless, it would be too simplistic to point the accusing finger only at the LTTE. Sections of the Sri Lankan state that could not reconcile to India's military intervention also played a significant role that led to the agreement's failure.

been the best deal at that time for the beleaguered Tamil community, providing a foundation that could have been cemented over months and years if everyone had genuinely respected it. It is also clear in retrospect that the Accord came about suddenly, almost like a bolt from the blue, taking by surprise even those who had no quarrel with peace. The abruptness meant that no serious analysis was probably done to

consented to provide military assistance to Sri Lanka if asked for (2.16, c). An annexure to the Agreement dealt mainly with issues of strategic interest affecting India, as well as Sri Lanka.

Looking back, the Indo-Sri Lanka accord could have

determine in advance if there could be spoilers and what should be India's response in such an eventuality.

India's then external affairs minister, P V Narasimha Rao, was the most senior figure in the Rajiv Gandhi government who felt that the Accord should be signed by the LTTE and Colombo. He was, however, overruled.

Over the years, the LTTE has taken most of the blame for the failure of the Accord, a development that led to a military showdown between the Tigers and the Indian military causing misery to innocents. There is no doubt that the LTTE wanted the pact to fail. It was in no mood to give up its armed campaign for a separate Tamil state for the sake of India. The LTTE chief, Velupillai Prabhakaran, was frank – and audacious – enough to tell an Indian journalist he had known for years, P S Suryanarayana, that he would scuttle the pact in such a manner that no one would be able to pin him down.

Nevertheless, it would be too simplistic to point the accusing finger only at the LTTE. Sections of the Sri Lankan state that could not reconcile to India's military intervention also played a significant role that led to the agreement's failure. Sri Lankan Prime Minister, Ranasinghe Premadasa – who later became the President, shook hands with the LTTE and ordered the Indian troops to go home – contributed in a major way to undermining the peace pact. The lack of political consensus in India, a situation that got aggravated once Indian troops began to die on Sri Lankan soil in large numbers, added to the mess.

Once the last of Indian troops had returned home in March 1990, soon after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was voted out, New Delhi more or less lost any interest in the agreement. Gandhi may still have had a desire to resurrect the Accord if he returned to power but that never happened. After a LTTE suicide bomber assassinated Gandhi in May 1991,

the loss of sympathy in India for the Tamil cause made matters worse. The killing left an indelible mark on the psyche of the people of India, which meted out a collective punishment to the Tamils of Sri Lanka in the form of a non-solution to the ethnic problem.

More and more Sri Lankan Tamils of all hues think today that their community may have been spared the suffering of the past 20 years if only the 1987 Agreement had not been allowed to fail and if only Gandhi's assassination had not compounded an already bad situation. In any case, the Indian establishment has not been able to forget the bitter truth that Colombo teamed up with the LTTE to trip the Indian military, which had taken on the Tigers so as to help preserve Sri Lanka's territorial integrity. The military help Sri Lanka provided to the LTTE created a feeling of betrayal in the Indian psyche that refuses to go away.

Even when Gandhi and J R Jayewardene – the two signatories to the Accord – were in power, the agreement could never be implemented the way it was meant to be. The LTTE never gave up all its weaponry, arguing that it would be suicidal to disarm unless Colombo was truly ready to embrace the Tamil minority. As the Tigers asserted later, they never accepted the pact in the first place, and it is now widely accepted that the LTTE remains firmly committed to its goal of setting up an independent Tamil state, come what may.

The fact is the Tigers were not ready to make up with anyone in 1987 – Colombo or the other Tamil groups. And once the Indian Army went after the LTTE, the suffering of the civilian population robbed the Accord of its sheen. The Sri Lankan state itself turned into a spoiler once Premadasa replaced Jayewardene as President.

While elections took place to pick a Northeastern Provincial Council, their fairness was in doubt in Sri Lanka's Northern Province.

The experiment, however, could still have made a mark if Colombo had been sincerely committed to the devolution of powers. But, Premadasa was determined not to let the Northeastern Provincial administration succeed, and this suited the LTTE too. Boxed in by Colombo and the LTTE, the Tamil provincial administration quickly collapsed. Once that happened, the 1987 pact lost all meaning.

When the 1987 agreement was drafted, the underlying assumption in New Delhi was that the Tamil side (LTTE included) was willing to shake hands with the Sri Lankan state, and that the latter too, was ready to bury the past. Two decades of bloodletting has proved this wrong.

The 1987 Agreement marked the first major international effort to bring peace to Sri Lanka. Its failure holds several lessons to anyone, including international actors, now desirous of playing peacemakers in the ethnic conflict.

When the 1987 agreement was drafted, the underlying assumption in New Delhi was that the Tamil side (LTTE included) was willing to shake hands with the Sri Lankan state, and that the latter too, was ready to bury the past. Two decades of bloodletting has proved this wrong. The "Tamil-speaking peoples" – which is how the Accord defined the inhabitants of Sri Lanka's northeast – have ceased to be the one single entity they once were. The fissures that developed slowly between the Tamils and the Tamil-speaking Muslims have led to a political divorce between their representatives. The LTTE's massacre of Muslims in the east and the ouster of Muslims from the north and the later birth of radical thinking among eastern Muslims have contributed to the sorry state of affairs.

The 2004 split in the LTTE and subsequent actions by the breakaway faction that target

the "northern (Jaffna) Tamils" have also produced a new completely unexpected factor in the dynamics of the northeast that nobody had bargained for. Even without this, the Sri Lankan Supreme Court edict bifurcating the north and east as two independent entities – a controversial ruling that would effectively take away Tamil

Most important, even international actors now active in Sri Lanka have come to one painful realization – no peace is possible in the island nation as long as the two main actors in the battlefield do not want to make peace. The LTTE remains adamantly wedded to the cause of breaking up Sri Lanka. The present dispensation in Colombo, meanwhile, is supremely confident that it can bring about a military solution to the ethnic conflict by crushing the LTTE.

control over the island's multiracial eastern wing – means that the "northeast" as defined by the 1987 Accord is dead for all practical purposes. Most important, even international actors now active in Sri Lanka have come to one painful realization – no peace is possible in the island nation as long as the two main actors in the battlefield do not want to make peace. The LTTE remains adamantly wedded to the cause of breaking up Sri Lanka. The present dispensation in Colombo, meanwhile, is supremely confident that it can bring about a military solution to the ethnic conflict by crushing the LTTE. Despite suffering serious setbacks, the latter however, feels it can overcome the military challenge as it has done in the past.

It is highly doubtful if either Colombo or the Tigers would ever like to act by the dictates of the 1987 Accord again. Politically, the agreement is dead and gone. That the 2002 Norwegian-sponsored and internationally-

backed Ceasefire Agreement too has suffered a similar fate should cause no major surprise. Both have revealed the limitations of outside powers to influence the course of events in Sri Lanka. However, both agreements, and in particular, the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka pact, can act as foundations to build a peaceful Sri Lanka if and when an opportune time comes.



**INSTITUTE OF PEACE
AND
CONFLICT STUDIES**

B 7/3 Safdarjung Enclave,
New Delhi 110029 INDIA