



INDIA AND SOUTH ASIA: MAY 2017 DOSSIER

The May 2017 Dossier highlights a range of domestic and foreign policy developments in India as well as in the wider region. These include an analysis of this year's important Presidential election, the recent deadly attack by Maoists, Turkish President Erdogan's visit to India, and Palestinian President Abbas seeking India's support, as well as the reaffirmation of India's ties with Sri Lanka.

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Part I India - Domestic developments

Summer months do normally see a reduction of political activities. Besides the events in Kashmir – the June issue will highlight them - an important Presidential election takes place this year and a deadly attack by Maoists is leading to introspection.

A Crucial Presidential Election

The election of the new President of India is of importance with regard to the question, if the BJP-led *National Democratic Alliance* (NDA) will be in a position, to carry forward its own candidate. The ruling formation is narrowly below the required majority, but has presumably the potential to co-opt the required votes from the pool of regional parties. After a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Jagan Reddy declared, that the *YSR Congress* would support any candidate, proposed by the BJP.

Possible candidates of the government

Currently, the government does not reveal its cards. The question is, if Modi and the NDA want to support a *Hindutva* oriented candidate or a personality, who represents modernity and a consensus across party-lines. Till now, such a proposal has not been put forward.

The election has to take place before the 25th of July, the day President Pranab Mukherjee leaves office.

Possible candidates from the government side are:

- Sumita Mahajan, 74 years, *Speaker* of the 'Lower House' (*Lok Sabha*)
- Sushma Swaraj, 65 years, Foreign Minister
- Mohan Bhagwat, 66 years, *Sarsanghchalak* ('Leader') of the *Swayam Sevak Sangh* (RSS)
- L. K. Advani, 89 years, former Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister during NDA 1.
- Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi, 83 years, former BJP – President and ex-cabinet minister.
- Droupadi Murmu, 59 years, currently Governor in Jharkhand and an *Adivasi* – woman. (Adivasis – approximately 100 million people - are the so-called 'original inhabitants' of India and categorized as „*Scheduled Tribes*“).
- T. C. Gehlot, 69 years, Minister for Social Justice and by social background a *Dalit* (erstwhile 'Untouchables').

But it cannot be ruled out, that the BJP/NDA might present a party independent personality like N. R. Narayana Murthy, co-founder of the IT-giant *Infosys*, as a sign to its commitment to modernity and development.

It can be assumed, that the polarising Mohan Bhagwat will not be presented, also not the charge-sheeted Advani. Otherwise, the still undecided regional parties like the Biju Janta Dal and the AIADMK could opt for a more acceptable candidate of the opposition.

Pranab Mukherjee or Gopalkrihsna Gandhi?

It also can be assumed, that the 81 years old Pranab Mukherjee will not stand for re-election, though allegedly the Congress and some opposition parties are considering this option.

Mukherjee, an erstwhile Congress stalwart, did not enter into any collision course with the NDA - government, while the well-read and liberal Gopalkrishna Gandhi could act differently in this regard.

It is interesting, that Mamata Bannerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal met recently her counterpart from Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, and they agreed allegedly to support a candidature of Gopalkrishna Devdas Gandhi * (see a short portrait under Annexure), a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi himself acknowledged, that discussions with regard to his possible candidature had taken place.

Gopalkrishna Gandhi – I have listened to him several times and read some of his writings – is with his worldview a true alternative to any of the possible BJP – candidates. He is anathema to Modi and above all to Mohan Bhagwat, whose name has been proposed in all earnest by the regional 'semi – fascist' Shiv Sena.

Perspectives

The forthcoming presidential election could be another mile – stone on the intended way by the BJP and the RSS, to enter into a different Republic.

It will be interesting to observe, how this show of strength between the BJP and the not fully united opposition will end. It will be certainly easier for the BJP, to lead its nominee to victory in the soon afterwards following election for the office of the Vice President.

Annex:

* Gopalkrishna Devdas Gandhi, born April 22, 1946, is an (retired) IAS officer and diplomat, who was the 22nd Governor of West Bengal, serving from 2004 to 2009. He served as Secretary to the President of India and as High Commissioner to South Africa and Sri Lanka, among other administrative and diplomatic posts.

His paternal grandfather was Mahatma Gandhi and maternal grandfather was C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji). He is the son of Devadas Gandhi and Lakshmi Gandhi. Gopalkrishna Gandhi is the younger brother of Rajmohan Gandhi, and the late Ramchandra Gandhi, and Smt. Tara Bhattacharjee (Gandhi), all of whom are distinguished in their own right.

Gandhi graduated with a master's degree in English literature from St. Stephen's College of Delhi University.

He joined the IAS as an officer in 1968 and served in Tamil Nadu state till 1985. Thereafter, he remained Secretary to the Vice-President of India (1985 – 1987) and Joint Secretary to President of India (1987 - 1992).

In 1992 he became Minister (Culture) in the High Commission of India, UK and Director, The Nehru Centre, London. This was followed by various diplomatic and administrative positions for the rest of his career, including High Commissioner of India to South Africa and Lesotho (1996), Secretary to the President of India (1997-2000), High Commissioner of India in Sri Lanka (2000), and Ambassador of India to Norway, and Iceland (2002), before his retirement from the IAS in 2003.

On 14 December 2004, he was appointed Governor of West Bengal. He was the Chairman of Kalakshetra Foundation, Chennai from December 2011 to May 2014. He was also the chairman of the governing body of the prestigious *Indian Institute of Advanced Studies* and president of its society on March 5, 2012 and served until May 2014. Currently, Gandhi teaches at Ashoka University, where he is a Professor of History and Politics.

While delivering the 15th D. P. Kohli Memorial Lecture for the *Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)*

on "*Eclipse at Noon: Shadows Over India's Conscience*", with nearly 3000 officers of the agency in the audience, Gandhi noted, that "*the CBI is seen as the government's hatchet, rather than honesty's ally. It is often called DDT — meaning not the dichloro diphenyl trichloroethane, the colourless, tasteless, odourless insecticide it should be, but the department of dirty tricks.*"

G. Gandhi has published a variety of books and articles. He and his wife Tara Gandhi have two daughters.

Crisis of Maoism and Counter Strategies

The recent attack by a Maoist commando of about three hundred armed cadres on the 24th of April 2017 resulted in the killing of 25 members of the *Central Reserve Police Force* (CRPF) – on the 11th of March already 12 CRPF – personnel had been killed in the Sukma district in Bastar in Chhattisgarh - was part of the so-called *Technical Counter Offensive Campaign* (TCOC) by the Maoists between March and June of each year.

These ambushes led to intensive discussions and reactions within media and also the government about a possible revision of current strategies.

Decline of Maoist strength

In 2004, the area of influence of the then newly founded *Communist Party of India (Maoist)* – a coming together of the *People's War Group* (PWG) from Andhra Pradesh and the *Maoist Coordination Centre* (MCC) from Bihar – in a belt of nine states between South India upto the India – Nepal border, has been covering 27% of the Indian landmass and a population of 39%.

Under the leadership of Muppala Lakshmana Rao alias 'Ganapathy', now 67 years old, the movement expanded into inaccessible areas in Central India with a parallel government, own schools, courts and financial departments, accompanied by the expansion of the *People's Liberation Guerilla Army* (PLGA) with more than 2 000 cadres alone in Bastar in Chhattisgarh.

India's Home Minister Rajnath Singh announced on the 17th of March 2017 in the *Lok Sabha*, that the number of districts affected by '*Left - Wing Extremism*' (LWE) has been reduced from 106 to 68. The 35 most affected districts are in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Telangana and Maharashtra.

- In Chhattisgarh, the territory controlled by Maoists shrank from 20 000 square kilometers ten years ago to only slightly more than 5 000 square kilometers now. 2010, 1 180 people lost their lives – an absolute peak – in incidents caused by Maoists, while in 2016 this came down to 161. Yet, during the first four months of 2017, already 158 Maoists, civilians and security forces lost their lives.
- During the last seven years altogether 848 leading cadres of the highly hierarchised CPI (Maoist) have been either killed, captured or they have surrendered, amongst them two members of the Central Committee of the party. According to the Home Ministry, altogether 1 442 Maoists surrendered, more than threefold the number than in 2015. Between January and March 2017, already 397 Maoists surrendered. Most of the members of the Central Committee and the Politbureau are living allegedly in urban centres along the borders of Chhattisgarh.

Deficits of the Central – and state governments

Although the conflict between the Indian state and the Maoists is in a critical phase, the central government shows certain lethargy towards this situation. No radical new approach is recognisable. The CRPF was for nearly two months without a *Director General*. Deficits in its policy, equipment, force strength and training are not being addressed, *according* to observers.

Irrespective of budget allocations for mine-protected vehicles, drones, *'thermal imagers'* and earth penetrating radars, they are not procured in sufficient numbers. The CRPF does not possess any workshops in regions affected by Maoists, so that at least about 40% of its vehicles can not be operated.

Within the last three years, seven thousand persons left the CRPF, amongst them 1085 Inspectors, Sub-Inspectors and Assistant Sub-inspectors, which led the various units in operations against the Maoists. 16 of 28 selected officers of the *Border Security Force* (BSF) refused this year to resume their positions, predominantly in Kaschmir.

Deficits of the Maoists

The Maoists are increasingly limited in their radius of action and have only limited capacities, to carry out sustainable actions. For instance in Jharkhand, the core group of its cadres got reduced from 1 200 to nowadays only 400 during the last decade.

The increasingly ageing leadership – predominantly Brahmins with technical qualifications – hails essentially from the Telugu speaking states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. A leadership from the affected *Adivasi* – population, that means from the so – called *'Scheduled Tribes'*, is not really getting recruited.

The Maoists use increasingly also child – soldiers, an estimated 200 in their operations. An unknown number of them have been killed.

Child soldiers are often abducted, according to estimates by the police during the last years about one thousand. In the jungles they receive weapons training and are then being involved in criminal acts like killings. They are used as messengers and informants, besides placing *„Improvised Explosive Devices“* (IED's).

The Maoists, the only real challengers of the rule of the democratically elected state class, are not in a position to demonstrate to the Indian public a truly alternative development model.

New approaches of the government?

After the deadly attack in the district of Sukma in Chhattisgarh, the central government announced, that it would review its strategy in its battle against the Maoists. The ten states affected by LWE are: Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra.

Home Minister Rajnath Singh appealed during the meeting at the 8th of May 2017 to the state governments, *„to take over the full responsibility for the operations.“* Nitish Kumar, Chief Minister of Bihar, retorted, that the central government could not confine itself within a federal structure to an exclusive *„monitoring role“*.

Rajnath Singh: „We have to bring aggression into our policy, there should be aggression in our thinking, aggression in our strategy, aggression in deploying security forces , aggression in the operations, aggression in bringing development, aggression in road construction. We have to be careful, that an extremely defensive deployment could lead to a reduction of the operational offensive.“

Besides emphasizing increased development of the affected areas – there are 7.8 millions so-called „Tribals“ in Chhattisgarh – out of which 54.7% in rural areas are living below the so-called poverty line - and a better coordination of the involved departments, the government banks above all on military efforts. There is a '*militarisation of the region*'. In the Sukma – district the ratio between the security forces and the civilians is 1 : 14, whereas in the rest of India it is 1 : 100.

The government announced:

- An increase in the number of flying hours of helicopters by the Indian airforce in these areas.
- Commando – training by the Indian army for the *District Reserve Guard* (DRG)
- Deployment of the *India Reserve Battalions* (IRBs) instead of the *Central Reserve Police Force* (CRPF) during road construction programmes.
- More joint *Commando- and-Control – Centres*.

The DRG is a wing of the police in Chhattisgarh, with predominantly village inhabitants and surrendered Maoists. IRGs are weaponised Police – Units in each state, trained for special situations.

More than 2 000 members of the police in Chhattisgarh have already passed an army – training in the *School of Jungle Warfare* in Warangal in Mizoram.

Besides, the government tries to stop the financial flows to the Maoists, amongst them intimidations, poppy cultivation, illegal mining and abductions. A study of the *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses* (IDSA), which operates under the auspices of the Defence Ministry, estimates, that the Maoists acquire annually about 1 500 crores of Rupees (1 crore corresponds to about 145 000 Euro).

Besides the technological approach, as for instance the use of UAVs, the proposal for a unified commando of all the affected states and the announcement to withdraw the central security forces from the more quiet to the more disturbed areas – which requires the consent of the state governments – the central government proposes a better technical support for intelligence operations.

The government prepares in the foreseeable future for a comprehensive attack on the Maoist bastions in Bastar. It will be the biggest operation of the NDA – government. The troops will penetrate from several sides deep into Maoist territory.

Interestingly, leading BJP – functionaries mention nowadays as well with regard to Kashmir and the areas controlled by Maoists „to achieve a final solution and to eliminate the last terrorist“.

The role of the civilian population

The Maoists are trying in the areas under their control, that the population is not coming under the influence of the Indian state. They try to stop the massive road construction programmes of the government with its motto „clear – hold – build“ in their areas of influence.

The civilian population is getting in these conflicts between both the fronts, like the professor and

activist Nalini Sundar described it in her book '*The Burning Forest. India's War in Bastar.*' Juggernaut Books, New Delhi 2016, (ISBN 9789386228000). Human rights violations of both sides are a daily routine, also sexual force by security personnel against women. Experts say, that an adequate reporting about such incidents is not happening.

The District – Magistrate of Sukma, Niraj Kumar Bansod, said, that 86 of the 146 Village Councils are functioning without major challenges and that the population can use the various development programmes. Yet, in two dozens of Village Councils, the government machinery is not present at all. The Maoists try to retain their 'secure zones' and threaten the population not to use mobile telephones and to return their *Adhaar – Cards* to the relevant authorities.

Many children in these areas have never seen in their lives the Indian Tricolore and only know Lal *Salam* (Red Greeting) and black flags. Mainly between 2004 und 2009, the Maoists destroyed alone in the Sukma – District 124 schools, which the government tries to rebuild.

Perspectives

If the thesis is correct, that the Maoists are in decline, it can not be expected, that a sustainable increase of attacks will take place in the near future. But the Sukma attack is definitely not an isolated case.

- Dr. Ajay Sahni, Executive – Director of the *Institute for Conflict Management* in Delhi and an excellent expert on Maoism in India, warns, to declare too early a victory against the Maoists: „*The Maoists retain sufficient operational capacities, to inflict important damages. They have again and again demonstrated this during the previous months and years. If the recent incident will be seen as the last spark of burning coal, then we should be prepared for more such sparks.*“

Appendix:

The website of the *Ministry of Home Affairs* (MHA) delineates its approach as:

“THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA’S APPROACH

The Government’s approach is to deal with Left Wing Extremism in a holistic manner, in the areas of security, development, ensuring rights and entitlements of local communities, improvement in governance and public perception management. In dealing with this decades-old problem, it has been felt appropriate, after various high-level deliberations and interactions with the State Governments concerned, that an integrated approach aimed at the relatively more affected areas would deliver results. With this in view, a detailed analysis of the spread and trends in respect of Left Wing Extremist violence has been made and 106 districts in nine States have been taken up for special attention with regard to planning, implementation and monitoring various interventions. However, 'Police' and 'Public Order' being State subjects, action on maintenance of law and order lies primarily in the domain of the State Governments. The Central Government closely monitors the situation and supplements and coordinates their efforts in several ways. These include providing Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) and Commando Battalions for Resolute Action

(CoBRA); sanction of India Reserve (IR) battalions, setting up of Counter Insurgency and Anti Terrorism (CIAT) schools; modernisation and upgrade of the State Police and their Intelligence apparatus under the Scheme for Modernization of State Police Forces (MPF scheme); re-imburement of security related expenditure under the Security Related Expenditure (SRE) Scheme; filling up critical infrastructure gaps under the Scheme for Special Infrastructure in Left Wing Extremism affected States; providing helicopters for anti-naval operations, assistance in training of State Police through the Ministry of Defence, the Central Police Organisations and the Bureau of Police Research and Development; sharing of Intelligence; facilitating inter-State coordination; assistance in community policing and civic action programmes etc. The underlying philosophy is to enhance the capacity of the State Governments to tackle the Maoist menace in a concerted manner. The Division also monitors the implementation of Integrated Action Plan for LWE affected Districts (now called Additional Central Assistance to LWE affected districts) and various other development and infrastructure initiatives of Govt. of India.”

Part II India - Foreign Policy Developments

Dr. Joyce Lobo writes on the visits by two leaders from West Asian countries— President Erdogan and President Abbas.

President Erdogan Visits India first

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to India (April 30-May 01, 2017), ironically timed with India's Vice President Hamid Ansari's visit to Armenia and when the President of Cyprus had just concluded his Indian visit. These visits could not be attributed much to coincidence, knowing fully well of Turkey's sensitivities. However, Turkey's position on issues, where Pakistan is concerned, has neither been neutral nor favourable to India.

However, both countries have maintained continuation in terms of exchanges and bilateral relations, particularly in the economic sphere, which was the key highlight of the visit. Also, the visit became Erdogan's first trip outside Turkey, after he won the referendum to change the parliamentary type to a presidential government.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi held bilateral talks on May 01 with Erdogan. The latter was accompanied by five cabinet ministers—foreign affairs, economy, energy, culture and tourism, transport, communications and maritime affairs. This also included a strong 150-member business delegation.

Though not substantive in nature, about five agreements were signed in the areas of telecom, diplomacy, culture, press etc.

Trade: Modi said during his address to the *India-Turkey Business Forum*, that both sides share “a common outlook on the present economic order in the world”.

Both countries have earmarked economic opportunities, which could be made possible through trade and FDI inflows, technology and project collaborations, etc. So far, companies from Turkey have invested in blue chip companies and through FDIs in India. India wants Turkey's participation in the knowledge-based economy, while also trickling their investments to small and medium enterprises.

Areas, which both countries have identified for economic cooperation, were in the energy sector, which included hydrocarbons, solar and wind energy. Other areas were mining, food processing, textiles, the auto sector, IT, pharmaceuticals, health, tourism, etc. The *India-Turkey Joint Committee on Economic & Technical Cooperation* has been tasked to review the kind of promotion, that has been ushered by the respective leaderships.

Modi made a pitch for the initiatives (*Make in India, Start up India and Digital India*), that have been introduced in the country, while seeking Turkish participation in infrastructural projects—be it housing, railways, ports, airports, highways, renewable energy and power. Both countries have identified complementarities in terms of India's aspiration to build smart cities.

The bilateral trade has grown from US\$ 2.8bn to US\$ 6.4bn in 2016. As per the provisional data in the *Ministry of External Affairs* of India, Turkey's imports from India were US\$ 878.14mn while India's

imports were US\$ 110.89mn (January-February 2017). Both sides agreed to increase the trade value upto US\$ 10bn by 2020. A *Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement* is still being worked out by a *Joint Study Group* since 2010.

No forward movement: There have been a couple of areas, where both sides do not converge, one of them being terrorism. In all these irritant areas, the Pakistan factor cannot be missed. Both recognise the need to dismantle terrorist forces. However their stances are not common, on who the terrorists are and about their source of origin. The Turkish administration believes, that the *Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organisation* (FETO), which was blamed for an attempt on Erdogan's life, has its presence in India through schools and associations. Though Erdogan called for countering terrorism, he has given his country's position on the issue of Kashmir to the media. Erdogan offered his good offices to mediate between India and Pakistan, which is an unacceptable position for New Delhi, as it considers it to be a bilateral and terrorism issue. Turkey is already a part of the infrastructure network in the *Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir* (PoK), that India objects to.

The second area is reforming the *UN Security Council* (UNSC). Though both countries believe, that comprehensive reforms in the UN is the need of the hour, both diverge in terms of their course of action. Turkey, like Pakistan, is part of the *Uniting for Consensus*, a group of countries, that oppose UNSC expansion by increasing the number of permanent members. Rather they seek the increase in the number of non-permanent countries.

The third was on the *Nuclear Suppliers Group* (NSG) membership. India seeks membership to the NSG and the *Wassenaar Agreement*. Turkey had been one of India's supporters in its bid to the *Missile Technology Control Regime* in June 2016. In terms of the NSG, Turkey has taken a similar position to that of China. It wants both India and Pakistan to be members. It had earlier held, that India should work with other countries towards a consensus and that has now meant, agreeing with Turkey's and China's position. The discussions become important, as India will again seek membership, when the NSG plenary session will take place in June this year.

Conclusion: There was much of an economic connect, but what one fails to understand is Modi's reference to "*India and Turkey enjoy great historic and cultural connect*". Both sides, despite differences, are attempting to have normal relations without descending to nothingness. For India, the NSG membership is a goal, that it will not give up pursuing. For Turkey, having good economic ties with one of the well performing economies suits its present condition, as relations with West turn sour. India can be commended for the patient diplomacy it plays with countries like Turkey, to arrive at consensus on issues, that hold its interest.

Mahmoud Abbas seeks India's support

The President of Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas, was on a state visit to India (May 14-17), primarily to seek support for the peace process in the West Bank region. India is moving closer to Israel in terms of forging better ties, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi set to become the first Indian premier to visit Tel Aviv in early July. However the *Ministry of External Affairs* (MEA) of India termed its support to the Palestinian cause as "*political support*". India continues to have good relations through development assistance, that comes in the form of technical and financial assistance. About five memoranda of understanding were signed in areas of diplomatic affairs, sports and youth affairs,

agriculture, health, IT and electronics between both the countries. India aims to assist in making Ramallah an IT hub.

Although not much was said or found regarding the visit in the MEA website, in an interview to *The Hindu* Abbas pointed out, that Israel was against a two-state solution. Being the fifth visit and third in terms of state visits (2008 and 2012), Abbas talks with the Indian leadership largely revolved to seek support for the peace process. He believes that international support will enable the successful emergence of a two states formula, based on the 1967 borders.

Despite India's growing ties with Israel, Abbas visit suggests the Palestinian Authority's belief in India playing a role, by being part of international support to their cause. The Congress party, while in power, had traditionally been supportive of Palestine, for which one of the factors was the domestic Muslim audience. Modi and his party ideologues do not believe in secularism and brand those, who profess this credo as 'pseudo-seculars'. His party cadres have shown signs and actions of being Islamophobic. Much depends on what he has to say while in Israel or will he ever espouse the "political support", when in Israel. President Donald Trump during his mid-May visit to Israel and Palestine supported the peace process, while making no mention of the two-state solution. This had a negative effect amongst the Palestinians, that the current USA government will support the Israel cause. Maybe with this sort of a premonition in mind, Abbas may have utilised the visit for requesting India, to take a pro-active role for the Palestinian cause. Palestine today has the support of the European Union, Russia, the Arab countries, and also from certain sections of Israelis, including the *Labour Party*. It depends on how Modi will juggle with the Palestinian cause, forming closer ties with Israel and national interest.

Part III South Asia

Dr. Joyce Lobo analyses Modi's visit to Sri Lanka, that differs from his predecessors.

Modi Reaffirms Ties with Sri Lanka

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Sri Lanka (May 11-12) on a purpose different so far undertaken by his predecessors on two counts, including the one he undertook in March 2015. One has to do with the celebrations associated with Buddhism. Second, is the visit to 'Indian Tamils' instead of 'Sri Lankan Tamils'. In his customary way, he greeted his audience in Sri Lanka with a personal touch of bringing "*greetings of 1.25 billion people*". Since his visit is on invitation to the Buddhist celebrations, there was no formal talk but interaction with the current leadership, including the former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The informal discussions revolved around the current theme of the celebrations and to promote tourism on similar lines. Talks also included space cooperation, given the fact that recently India dedicated the SAARC satellite, which will benefit the South Asian countries.

Vesak observance: Modi presided as the Chief Guest at the *14th International Vesak Day* celebrations, extolling the significant role that Sri Lanka played in 1999 for *Vesak* to be recognised by the UN. *Vesak* marks the birth, enlightenment and the passing away of Buddha, that is being celebrated in South Asian and East Asian countries. Moreover in his earlier visits to these countries, he has not failed to build on the religious-cultural linkages with India in his speeches. Modi's presence in Sri Lanka on this occasion signifies religious diplomacy, an area that was not well utilised.

A land which has seen much violence and discrimination towards the ethnic minorities celebrated the *UN Vesak Day*, along with representatives of other countries including India in attendance. The celebrations themed on "*Buddhist Teachings for Social Justice and Sustainable World Peace*", thus finding relevance to modern times. Still, reconciliation is becoming a distant dream in Sri Lanka. India has supported the Sri Lankan co-sponsored UN Resolution "*Promoting Reconciliation, Accountability and Human Rights in Sri Lanka*" at the *United Nations Human Rights Council* (UNHRC). This gives Colombo additional two years to finish the process. India, which was participating in the celebrations, needs to also retrospect the much wanted reconciliation in Kashmir through dialogue.

Connecting with 'Indian Tamils': In a departure from his predecessors, Modi became the first Indian premier to visit the Central Province, wherein he met the descendants of the Tamil bonded labourers and those, that migrated from South India in the 19th century to work in tea plantations. Modi showed his continuance to connect with the Indian Diaspora, however not exactly on a magnanimous scale as done at the Madison Square, Toronto or Sydney.

The 'Indian Tamils' also called as 'Hill Country Tamils' are the most neglected people within Sri Lanka, even looked down upon by the 'Sri Lankan Tamils', who have been the early settlers. In Dickoya, he addressed the 'Hill Country Tamils' and inaugurated a multi-speciality hospital built with Indian assistance. He promised socio-economic assistance, which may hopefully elevate their inhuman conditions. Modi's visit gains significance, as it differs from March 2015, wherein he visited Colombo, Anuradhapura, Jaffna and Talaimanar.

The 'Hill Country Tamils' constitute about 5% of the total Lankan population, yet they feel neglected by India and also by Tamil Nadu, which have given extensive importance and support to Sri Lankan Tamils living in the north and eastern part of Sri Lanka. The 'divide and rule' policy of the British, that favoured the 'Hill Country Tamils' over the Sinhalese, led to the stripping of their citizenships after

independence. Their conditions have remained in a pitiful state or in virtual slavery, as most of them continued as plantation workers living in line houses. Built during the British time, a line house would measure upto 12 feet by 10 feet by 9 feet, which opened into a long verandah. The Indian tea plantation workers too have experienced and continue to experience inhuman conditions like their Sri Lankan counterparts.

Though the Indian Tamils have not associated with the cause of Tamil liberation in general or under the LTTE, they have faced racial discrimination and violence, including uprooting from their original dwellings during riots or tensions between the Tamil and Sinhalese groups. More than half a million Indian Tamils were repatriated to India under the 1964 pact. It was only in 2003 the remaining ones, that were not repatriated, were given citizenship of Sri Lanka. The visit by Modi adds a new dimension with a promise, that henceforth India would give more focus to their concerns.

Other areas of cooperation: There have been a good number of exchanges between India and Sri Lanka. In the recently re-shuffled cabinet, former Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraveera was attributed to bringing both countries together after the cold, that set in during Rajapaksa's rule. During the working visit of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe last month, the Memorandum of Understanding for '*Cooperation in Economic Projects*' was signed. This was to give a bilateral framework for future economic cooperation, while the *Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement* (ETCA) is in the advanced stages of completion.

In terms of the fishermen issue, India is attempting a permanent solution and as part of this, the central and the Tamil Nadu governments have begun to fund the efforts in enabling the Indian fishermen to give up bottom trawling for deep sea fishing using long liners. This is to address the concerns of the Sri Lankan fishermen.

While both have to work towards a reconciliation process, Sri Lanka has supported India on the Kashmir issue, which became the key reason for New Delhi's refusal to participate in the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) of China, including its recently convened grand forum meet on the same. During this forum meet, Sarath Amanugama, Sri Lanka's *Minister on Special Assignment* said, that the BRI issue goes "*through the heart of Indian interests*" (referring to the Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir), making it impossible to participate. Also he reiterated to the media, that his country could not allow the Sri Lankan territory to be used for foreign military operations, especially in the ports, except for commercial purposes. In recent times, China has been denied access for docking its submarines, suggesting Colombo's equidistant approach.

However it is easier to see the Chinese connection with the kind of political dispensation at the helm. Beijing made a windfall during Rajapaksa's rule. And in 2014, it docked its submarine in Colombo. However Chinese investments in areas like the Hambantota harbour will continue as the former was awarded mega projects during Rajapaksa's time. Today, Colombo has incurred extended debt. However in terms of maritime security, the current leadership intends only to take assistance from India, which includes tracking submarines, providing patrolling boats, etc. India needs to work better relations with any leadership, that will rule Sri Lanka, if the current ties are to be maintained.
