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## Book Review: Indian intervention in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict and its impact

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[\*“Oor Enapprachinaiyum Oor Oppanthamum” (An Ethnic Conflict and An Accord) by T Ramakrishnan 2017. Published by Kalaignaan Pathippagam, Chennai-600017, Rs 180]

India-Sri Lanka relations after their independence have seen many crests and troughs. The Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement (ISLA) signed by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and President JR Jayawardane on July 29, 1987 and India's military intervention that followed was a watershed moment in their relations. Its impact has continued to haunt, not only the relations between the two countries, but in shaping Sri Lanka's policy on ensuring ethnic peace that continues to be a work in progress.

Many tomes have been written about the ISLA and the Indian Peace Keeping Force operations in Sri Lanka by researchers and authors from both sides of the Palk Strait. In this context veteran journalist T Ramakrishnan's recently published book on the subject is unique in many ways. Packed with information, it takes an unbiased, holistic look at the complex situation that preceded the signing of the ISLA and its aftermath. The book is enriched by the author's hands on experience as The Hindu's Colombo correspondent (April 2015 to August 2016). His interviews with key players of the period in both the countries with painstaking references provides the reader with a better grasp the complexities involved in building a win-win relations with Sri Lanka.

The book is of special interest to me, not only because I served as the head of Intelligence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka (1987-90) but also due to my familial links with the island nation. The wisdom of PM Rajiv Gandhi in signing the ISLA has been questioned by many on different grounds. When I landed in Palali as part of the Indian military contingent soon after the agreement was signed, I met our family friend Rajendra, a retired senior civil servant of Sri Lanka, in Jaffna. As we sipped the fragrant tea, he warned me “You don't know

about Jayawardane; he is a wily fox. He will have Rajiv Gandhi for breakfast. Watch my word, he will use of the agreement to make you fight the LTTE.” I did not believe him then because we believed we were not in Sri Lanka to fight but to ensure the ISLA succeeds in bringing ethnic peace. To my regret, Rajendra’s prediction came not only true, but cost his life when the IPKF-LTTE war reached his doorstep exactly three months later!

A few aspects discussed in the book are interesting because they highlight how Rajiv Gandhi’s well intentioned initiative came out with disastrous consequences for his political life. Was LTTE leader Prabhakaran coerced to go with the ISLA? The author has included the comments of various persons who were in the loop when Indian PM’s representatives and Prabhakaran were in contact before the accord was signed. From this it would appear Prabhakaran was not kept in confinement as he could be reached on phone by his friends. However, scribes were kept out. While Prabhakaran was not coerced, he was persuaded to go with the Accord for his own benefit, probably both in cash and kind. Prabhakaran’s in his first public speech after the signing of the ISLA at Suthumalai on August 3, 1987 confirms this. He said though the agreement affected the Tamil Tigers, “we love India. We love Indian people. We will not use our weapons against Indian troops.” Of course, took up arms against India three months later is a matter of detail.

What was the point of no return at which the LTTE decided to fight India? Was it India’s lack of response to the fast unto death by Thileepan to force India to observe “all the terms” of the ISLA? Probably not. In the author’s view, the apprehension of 12 top LTTE leaders like Kumarappa and Pulendran by Sri Lanka Navy when they were moving with personal weapons on the high seas off Jaffna coast and President Jayawardane’s refusal to release them was the trigger for LTTE’s decision to go to war.

I was a witness when they chewed on the cyanide capsule (smuggled by LTTE which supplied the food for them) and committed suicide at the airport lounge. So I can categorically say that they were not under our protection at any point of time. However, our troops were available close by. Probably the LTTE expected India to intervene to get the 12 persons released from Sri Lankan army custody. When India did not, the LTTE probably decided to fight India. This was reflected in the words of Mahathiya, close associate of Prabhakaran and high in the pecking order of the group, when he came to collect the 12 LTTE leaders’ bodies from the Sri Lanka army. I was present there and he told me that the Indian army would pay with 1200 lives for the 12 LTTE dead.

In author’s view, the 1972 Constitution enacted during PM Sirimavo Bandaranaike’s rule sowed the seeds of Sinhala over lordship, leading to final estrangement between Sinhala and Tamils. He feels PM Indira Gandhi, who enjoyed close personal friendship with Sirimavo, could have taken up the issue with her friend to tone down the constitution to make it more equitable. This surmise looks farfetched, because by 1972 Sinhala nationalism was well entrenched in politics after successfully forcing both Bandaranaike in 1958 and Senanayake in 1968 to renege their pacts signed with SJV Chelvanayagam on devolving powers to minorities.

Perhaps the most important part in the book is the chapter “Is it possible to resolve the ethnic confrontation?” (pages 131-142). The author should be congratulated for his forthright analysis of the Tamil issue in the present context, when Sri Lanka Tamils are, perhaps, most

vulnerable. His suggestions for Tamil people and polity and Sri Lanka people and government to understand their priorities correctly packs a lot of wisdom. The timeline on Sri Lanka given at the end is a useful addition to the book. Overall, the book is well worth reading. It is a valuable addition to the Sri Lanka affairs library. The author would do well to consider bringing out an English translation of the book for the benefit of the global audience.

*(Col R Hariharan, a retired MI officer, served as the head of Intelligence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka from 1987 to 90. He is associated with the Chennai Centre for China Studies, South Asia Analysis Group and the International Law & Strategic Analysis Institute, Chennai.)*

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