



## Issue of Tamilians in Sri Lanka

**For Prelims:** Issue of Tamilians in Sri Lanka, UNHRC, UN Charter, LTTE.

**For Mains:** Effect of Policies & Politics of Countries on India's Interests, India and its Neighbourhood, India-Sri Lanka Relations.

### Why in News?

Recently, India has expressed concern over the **lack of any measurable progress** by Sri Lanka on its **commitment towards reaching a political solution** on the Tamil issue.

- India, in its statement at the **51<sup>st</sup> session** of the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#) in Geneva said it has “always believed in the responsibility of **States for promotion and protection of human rights** and constructive international dialogue and cooperation” guided by the [U.N. Charter](#).

### What Concerns were Raised by India?

- The current crisis in Sri Lanka has **demonstrated the limitations of a debt-driven economy** and the impact it has on the standard of living.
- It is in the best interests of Sri Lanka to build the capacity of its citizens and work towards their empowerment.
- Over 13 years since the end of Sri Lanka’s civil war in 2009, when tens of thousands of civilians were killed and disappeared, **survivors continue demanding justice and accountability** for war-time crimes.
- In the post-war years, Sri Lanka’s human rights defenders have **frequently flagged concerns over persisting militarisation**, especially in the Tamil-majority north and east, repression, and the shrinking space for dissent.

### What is the Tamil Issue and its History?

- **Background:**
  - Sri Lanka is 74.9 % Sinhalese and 11.2 % Sri Lankan Tamil. Within these two groups, **Sinhalese tend to be Buddhist and Tamils tend to be Hindu**, displaying significant **linguistic and religious** divisions.
  - It is believed that the Tamils arrived in Sri Lanka both as **invaders and traders** from **India’s Chola Kingdom**.
  - Some origin stories suggest that the **Sinhalese and Tamil communities have experienced tension** from the very beginning—not out of cultural incompatibility, but **rather out of power disputes**.
- **Pre-Civil War:**
  - During British Rule the pattern of Tamil favoritism **left Sinhalese people feeling isolated** and oppressed. Soon after **British occupiers left the island in 1948**, these **patterns of Tamil dominance changed dramatically**.

- After British independence, many Sinhalese gained power and went **on to gradually pass acts effectively disenfranchising their Tamil counterparts, which led to the creation of [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam \(LTTE\)](#) in 1976.**
  - LTTE was an uncompromising group inspired by **Che Guevarra and his guerilla warfare tactics.**
- The **conflict then escalated into civil war in 1983, leading to** riots targeting Tamils in Colombo.
- The fighting lasted just under **three decades and ended in May 2009**, when the Sri Lankan government announced that **they killed the LTTE leader.**
- **Post-Civil War:**
  - Although the Civil War ended in 2009, the current **situation in Sri Lanka has only partially improved.**
  - A large portion of the **Tamil population remains displaced.** While there are fewer political and civil rights issues, **instances of torture and enforced disappearances persist** even in recent years.
  - The government's **Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) targets mostly Tamils.** In a more subtle sense, the **Sri Lankan government continues to disenfranchise the Tamil community.**
  - Through the **process of "Sinhalization,"** for instance, Sinhalese culture has **slowly replaced that of the Tamil population.**
  - Sinhalese monuments, road signs, street and village names, as well as **Buddhist places of worship became more common in predominantly Tamil areas.**
  - These efforts have infringed upon, and **in some cases even erased,** the Tamil perspective on Sri Lankan history, as well as Tamil and Hindu elements of the country's culture.



### What are the Concerns for India?

- **Rehabilitation of Refugees:** A lot of Srilankan Tamils who evaded from Srilankan civil war (2009) are seeking refuge in Tamil Nadu. They are not returning in fear of being targeted again. It is a challenge for India to rehabilitate them.
- **Sentiments of Indian Tamils:** A number of protests and criticism is drawn at the end of the Indian Government for overlooking the plight of Srilankan Tamils to maintain good relationship with Srilanka.
- **Strategic interests vs Tamil question:** Often India has to trade off on the question of Tamilian minority rights over strategic issues to protect its economic interests in its neighborhood and to counter Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean.

### What are the Other Issues in India-Sri Lanka Relations?

- **Killing of Fisherman:**
  - Killing of Indian fishermen by the Sri Lankan Navy is a lingering issue between these two nations.
  - In 2019 and 2020, a total of 284 **Indian fishermen were arrested** and a total of 53 Indian boats were confiscated by the Sri Lankan authorities.
- **East Coast Terminal project:**
  - In 2021 Sri Lanka canceled an MoU signed with India and Japan for the **East Coast Terminal project**.
- **Influence of China:**
  - China's rapidly growing economic footprint (and political clout as a corollary) in Sri Lanka is straining India-Sri Lanka relations.
  - China is already the largest investor in Sri Lanka, accounting for 23.6% of the total **Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)** during 2010-2019 as against 10.4% from India.
- **13<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Sri Lankan Constitution:**
  - It envisages devolution of necessary powers to the provincial councils to address the just demand of the Tamil people for equality, justice, peace, and respect within a united Sri Lanka.

## Way Forward

- It is in Sri Lanka's best interests to build the capacity of its citizens and work towards their empowerment, for which **devolution of power to the grassroots level is a pre-requisite**.
- Nurturing the **Neighbourhood First policy** with Sri Lanka is important for India to preserve its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region.

## UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

### Prelims

#### Q. Consider the following statements: (2020)

1. The value of Indo-Sri Lanka trade has consistently increased in the last decade.
2. "Textile and textile articles" constitute an important item of trade between India and Bangladesh.
3. In the last five years, Nepal has been the largest trading partner of India in South Asia.

#### Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

#### Ans: (b)

- As per data from the Department of Commerce, Indo- Sri Lanka bilateral trade value for a decade (2007 to 2016) was 3.0, 3.4, 2.1, 3.8, 5.2, 4.5, 5.3, 7.0, 6.3, 4.8 (in billion USD). It reflects continuous fluctuation in the trend of trade value. There has been an overall increase but the same cannot be said as consistent rise in trade value. **Hence statement 1 is not correct.**
- Bangladesh has been a major textile trading partner for India, with a share of more than 5% in exports and over 7% in imports. While annual textile exports to Bangladesh averages \$2,000 million, imports are worth \$400 (Year: 2016-17).
- The major items of exports are fibre and yarn of cotton, man-made staple fibres and man-made filaments while major import items include apparel and clothing, fabric and other made up textile articles. **Hence, statement 2 is correct.**
- According to the data, in 2016-17, Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia, followed by Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bhutan, Afghanistan and Maldives. The level of Indian exports also follows the same order. **Hence, statement 3 is not correct.**
- **Therefore, option (b) is the correct answer.**

## **Mains**

**Q.** In respect of India-Sri Lanka relations, discuss how domestic factors influence foreign policy. **(2013)**

**Source: TH**

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