

Modi's Visit to Sri Lanka

Chulanee Attanayake

Summary

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarked on a tour of the Maldives and Sri Lanka on 8-9 June 2019, indicating the priorities of foreign policy for his new government. The visit is Modi's first foreign visit after his swearing-in for the second time as the Prime Minister of India. It is also the first visit by an international leader to Sri Lanka after the deadly Easter bombing in April.

Symbolic Visit for Sri Lanka

When Indian Prime Minister Modi visited Sri Lanka for the first time in March 2015, it was symbolic for it was the first visit by an Indian premier after 28 years. It also signified a new era of bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka after relatively estranged relations for almost a decade during previous Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa's governing period. Making a second visit within two years as the Chief Guest at the International Vesak Day celebration reiterated the positive developments in bilateral ties. It also echoed the historical and cultural connections the two countries share.

Likewise, his stop-over in Colombo this time has an even deeper meaning - because Prime Minister Modi is the first foreign leader to visit Sri Lanka after the deadly Easter terror attacks in April 2019. His visit is considered a sign of India's affirmation of solidarity with Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the attacks. His choice of itinerary during his short stay in Colombo further emphasizes this point.

His first stop in Sri Lanka was at St. Anthony's Church in Kochchikade, Negombo – one of the sites of the horrific attacks. Soon after, in a [tweet](#), he once again condemned the terror attack as cowardly and expressed his confidence in Sri Lanka's ability to rise again.

Later, he took measures to meet all the key political leaders in Sri Lanka; President Maithripala Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Opposition Leader Mahinda Rajapaksa, and the leader of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), R. Sampanthan which is the main representative of the Tamil community in the Sri Lankan parliament. Meeting a group of senior parliamentarians of TNA amidst a tight schedule, signifies the sensitive role Tamil Nadu plays in the bilateral relations between Sri Lanka and India as well as Modi's willingness to address it.

Terrorism as a joint threat

Countering terrorism was the key theme in almost all the discussions. During his meetings with the President, Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader, PM Modi restated terrorism as a joint threat which requires a collective and focused response. He emphasized the need for close cooperation between the two countries in countering terrorism and enhancing security. In this regard, he has proposed bilateral intelligence sharing and a possible tripartite intelligence sharing mechanism between India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

As per on-going investigations, it has been revealed that the mastermind of the Easter attacks, Zaharan Hashim, has had substantial links with [South India](#) and the [Maldives](#) and has been a source of youth radicalization in the region. It has been reported that the National Investigation Agency of India (NIA) found out that four to five people in Sri Lanka were [in touch](#) with IS suspects in India either directly or through social media. Following the attack, the NIA also arrested some youth from Kerala. On 13 June 2019, it was reported that the NIA identified [some youth](#) who are allegedly part of an ISIS module propagating Hashim's preaching on social media. The fact that the NIA was the first to generate input about the possible bombing in Sri Lanka also reveals that they have identified and acknowledge the exponential threat posed by Hashim and his followers not only to Sri Lanka but also to the entire region.

Economic Cooperation

Deepening economic ties has also been among the top priorities in the discussions. In Modi's meeting with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, the main focus was on enhancing and strengthening economic ties between the two countries. India is Sri Lanka's largest import destination and the third-largest export market. In [2018](#), Sri Lanka's imports to India totalled US\$4.2 billion (S\$5.8 billion) and exports were at US\$777 million (S\$1.06 billion). India is also a key development partner. Through a recent [MOU](#) with the Sri Lanka Port Authority to develop the eastern terminal of the Colombo Port, India will be a key player in Sri Lanka's growing port industry.

Strong Message to the International Community

Most importantly, PM Modi's visit sent a strong message to the international community with regard to the security situation on the island. After the Easter attacks, several countries issued a travel warning against Sri Lanka citing its volatile security situation. This brought a significant impact on the country's tourism industry. During the past decade of post-war, Sri Lanka saw a tourism boom. Given the improved security of the island nation, annual tourist arrivals grew at a rapid rate. The [Annual Report](#) of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka reported that 2,333,796 tourists arrived in Sri Lanka in 2018.

With Sri Lanka named [the number one country](#) to travel to in 2019 by the *Lonely Planet*, it expected a rise in inbound tourism. However, with the travel warnings issued after the attacks, the tourism industry took a [massive hit](#) affecting more than 300,000 people in direct and indirect employment. Against this backdrop, PM Modi's visit emphasized a positive development in the security situation. Thus, a positive impact on the foreign tourist inflows into the island can be expected in the coming months.

PM Modi's visit to Sri Lanka has more meaning to the island nation in this hour of need. While it reiterates the foreign policy priorities for the new government of India, the visit emphasizes that Sri Lanka can count on its closest neighbour in its path to recovery from the unexpected deterioration of security.

.....

Dr Chulanee Attanayake is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be contacted at chulanee@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this article.