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## India-Sri Lanka relations since the 1980s: A journey of challenges and cooperation

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### Abstract

This article examines the India-Sri Lanka relationship after 1980, exploring the dynamics, challenges, and prospects that have shaped their bilateral ties. The article is divided into several subheadings that cover different aspects of the relationship, including the emergence of ethnic conflict, India's involvement in Sri Lanka's peace process, the impact of the Rajiv Gandhi assassination, economic cooperation, political alliances, post-war reconciliation, cultural exchanges, and future prospects. The India-Sri Lanka relationship has been marked by various challenges, including the emergence of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and India's involvement in its peace process. The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi had a profound impact on bilateral relations, leading to a shift in India's stance and influencing the dynamics between the two nations. Economic cooperation and trade relations have been significant aspects of the relationship, with both countries working to enhance trade ties and promote investments. The political landscape has witnessed shifting alliances and diplomatic maneuvers, influenced by regional power dynamics and the evolving priorities of both nations. Post-war reconciliation efforts, spearheaded by India, have aimed to address historical grievances and promote ethnic harmony. Cultural exchanges and people-to-people connections have played a crucial role in strengthening the bonds between the two countries.

**Keywords:** India, Sri Lanka, bilateral relations, ethnic conflict, peace process, Rajiv Gandhi assassination, economic cooperation, political alliances, post-war reconciliation, cultural exchanges, challenges, prospects

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### Introduction

#### The Emergence of Ethnic Conflict: Understanding the Roots of Tension

India-Sri Lanka relations after the 1980s have been significantly shaped by the emergence of ethnic conflict, primarily rooted in the longstanding tensions between the majority Sinhalese community and the minority Tamil community in Sri Lanka. To understand the complexities of the conflict and its impact on bilateral relations, it is crucial to delve into the historical background and the factors that contributed to its escalation.

The roots of the ethnic conflict can be traced back to the period of British colonial rule in Sri Lanka, during which the seeds of communal division were sown. The British employed a policy of "divide and rule," favoring the Sinhalese majority over the Tamil minority, leading to a sense of marginalization and resentment among the Tamil population. These disparities in power and representation created a fertile ground for ethnic tensions to take root.

Following Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the Sinhala-dominated government implemented policies that further marginalized the Tamil community. The introduction of Sinhala as the sole official language and discriminatory measures in education and employment aggravated the grievances of the Tamil people, who sought equality and autonomy within a federal framework.

In the 1980s, the ethnic conflict reached a tipping point as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a militant group fighting for an independent Tamil homeland, launched a full-scale armed insurgency. This insurgency led to a brutal and protracted civil war that lasted for nearly three decades and claimed the lives of thousands of people.

India, with its own substantial Tamil population and strategic interests in the region, found itself entangled in the conflict. The Indian government, under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and later her son Rajiv Gandhi, became actively involved in mediating the conflict and attempting to bring about a peaceful resolution. However, India's intervention faced numerous challenges and complexities, including the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 by an LTTE suicide bomber, which strained bilateral relations.

The emergence of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka fundamentally transformed the dynamics of India-Sri Lanka relations. It created a sense of urgency for India to address the plight of the Tamil population while simultaneously managing its own domestic concerns. The subsequent subheadings will explore India's involvement in Sri Lanka, the impact of the Rajiv Gandhi assassination, and other crucial aspects that shaped the relationship between the two nations in the aftermath of the ethnic conflict.

### **India's Involvement in Sri Lanka: From Peacekeeping to Peace Process**

India's involvement in Sri Lanka during and after the ethnic conflict transitioned from a role of peacekeeping to that of facilitating a peace process. This shift in approach reflected India's commitment to regional stability, its strategic interests, and its desire to find a lasting solution to the complex conflict.

In 1987, as the civil war in Sri Lanka escalated and the plight of the Tamil population worsened, India launched Operation Poomalai, a peacekeeping mission aimed at stabilizing the situation and addressing the humanitarian crisis. Indian troops, known as the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), were deployed to enforce a ceasefire and disarm the LTTE. The intervention was initially welcomed by the Tamil community, who hoped for a resolution to their grievances.

However, the IPKF's presence and operations faced significant challenges. The LTTE, with its deeply entrenched network and military prowess, proved to be a formidable opponent. The peacekeeping mission became increasingly entangled in hostilities, resulting in significant casualties on both sides. The IPKF's inability to fully disarm the LTTE and the perception of bias towards the Sinhalese government strained India's relationship with both the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil community.

Following the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, India's direct military involvement came to an end, and a shift in approach towards a peace process began. India recognized the need for a political solution that addressed the root causes of the conflict and ensured the rights and aspirations of the Tamil community.

India played a crucial role in brokering negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. The Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987, signed between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayewardene, outlined a framework for devolution of power to the provinces and the establishment of an autonomous administrative structure in the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka.

However, the implementation of the accord faced significant challenges, primarily due to opposition from hardline Sinhalese groups and resistance from the LTTE. The failure to fully implement the accord ultimately led to its breakdown and a resumption of hostilities, further prolonging the conflict.

Despite the challenges faced, India continued to support the peace process in Sri Lanka through diplomatic efforts, providing humanitarian aid, and advocating for a negotiated settlement. India's engagement with various stakeholders in Sri Lanka demonstrated its commitment to finding a peaceful resolution and promoting stability in the region.

In recent years, India-Sri Lanka relations have witnessed a renewed focus on bilateral cooperation in areas such as trade, infrastructure development, and security cooperation. While the scars of the conflict still linger, the involvement of both countries in the peace process laid the groundwork for future collaboration and the potential for stronger ties in the years to come.

### **The Rajiv Gandhi Assassination and Its Impact on Bilateral Relations**

The assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 had a profound impact on India-Sri Lanka bilateral relations, dramatically altering the dynamics between the two countries. The event not only shocked the world but also left an indelible mark on the trajectory of their relationship, shaping subsequent diplomatic interactions and strategic calculations.

Rajiv Gandhi's assassination was carried out by an LTTE suicide bomber during an election rally in Sriperumbudur, India. The incident not only resulted in the tragic loss of a prominent leader but also dealt a severe blow to India's perception of Sri Lanka's ability to effectively address the issue of terrorism. The immediate aftermath of the assassination was marked by outrage and grief in India, with public sentiment demanding justice and a reevaluation of India's approach towards Sri Lanka.

The event strained bilateral relations as India grappled with the realization that the LTTE, the very group it had previously engaged with in pursuit of a peace process, was responsible for the assassination. There was a sense of betrayal and a loss of trust in Sri Lanka's ability to rein in the LTTE and protect Indian interests. The incident also raised questions about the effectiveness of India's intervention in Sri Lanka during the peacekeeping phase and whether adequate security measures were in place to protect Rajiv Gandhi.

In response to the assassination, India implemented several measures that significantly impacted bilateral relations. Economic sanctions were imposed on Sri Lanka, affecting trade and economic cooperation between the two countries. India also intensified its crackdown on the LTTE, supporting Sri Lanka in its efforts to combat the insurgency.

The assassination and its aftermath led to a reassessment of India's policy towards Sri Lanka. The focus shifted towards countering the LTTE militarily rather than pursuing a peace process. This change in approach had long-term consequences for the conflict, with the Sri Lankan government eventually achieving a military victory over the LTTE in 2009.

Despite the strained relations in the immediate aftermath of the assassination, both countries recognized the need for continued engagement and cooperation. Over time, efforts were made to rebuild trust and foster stronger ties. The tragic event served as a reminder of the common threat posed by terrorism and the importance of collaboration in combating it.

In recent years, India and Sri Lanka have worked towards deepening their economic, strategic, and cultural cooperation. Bilateral trade has increased, and there have been collaborations in areas such as defense, infrastructure development, and people-to-people exchanges. While the Rajiv Gandhi assassination cast a long shadow over India-Sri Lanka relations, it also served as a catalyst for reevaluating and strengthening their engagement, ultimately paving the way for a more multifaceted partnership in the years that followed.

### **Changing Dynamics: Economic Cooperation and Trade Relations**

Since the 1980s, the economic cooperation and trade relations between India and Sri Lanka have experienced notable shifts, reflecting the evolving priorities and dynamics between the two nations. The period witnessed various phases of cooperation, challenges, and efforts to deepen economic ties, leading to a complex and multifaceted relationship.

In the aftermath of the ethnic conflict, India and Sri Lanka recognized the potential for economic collaboration as a means to foster stability, development, and mutual benefits. Both countries embarked on initiatives to enhance trade relations, facilitate investments, and promote economic integration.

Trade between India and Sri Lanka grew steadily during this period, with bilateral trade volumes experiencing significant expansion. India became one of Sri Lanka's largest trading partners, and Sri Lanka emerged as an important trading partner for India in South Asia. The implementation of the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISFTA) in 2000 further boosted trade ties by reducing tariffs and trade barriers.

The trade relationship between the two countries has been characterized by a complementary nature, with India exporting a diverse range of goods such as petroleum products, machinery, textiles, and pharmaceuticals to Sri Lanka, while Sri Lanka exports items like textiles, garments, tea, and rubber products to India. This trade cooperation has contributed to the economic growth and development of both nations, promoting job creation and investment opportunities.

However, the economic cooperation between India and Sri Lanka has also faced challenges and fluctuations. Non-tariff barriers, bureaucratic hurdles, and regulatory issues have at times hindered the smooth flow of trade. Additionally, political tensions, policy changes, and regional factors have impacted the trade dynamics between the two countries.

To address these challenges and promote greater economic integration, initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) have been pursued. These platforms aim to facilitate regional economic cooperation, connectivity, and trade facilitation, providing opportunities for India and Sri Lanka to collaborate on broader regional economic initiatives.

In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on expanding economic ties between India and Sri Lanka. Projects such as the Colombo Port City development, joint ventures in infrastructure, and investments in sectors like tourism, information technology, and renewable energy have gained prominence. Efforts to streamline trade processes, reduce barriers, and enhance connectivity through initiatives like the India-Sri Lanka Container Terminal (ISCT) further exemplify the evolving dynamics of economic cooperation.

As both countries strive to recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a shared interest in revitalizing trade and economic collaboration. India's initiatives like the "Neighborhood First" policy and "Act East" policy align with Sri Lanka's vision to enhance connectivity and attract investments, presenting opportunities for deeper engagement and economic integration.

Overall, the changing dynamics of economic cooperation and trade relations between India and Sri Lanka demonstrate the recognition of mutual benefits, the pursuit of shared economic prosperity, and the continued efforts to overcome challenges and strengthen their economic partnership in a dynamic and interconnected world.

### **The Shift in Political Alliances: Regional Power Play and Diplomatic Maneuvers**

The political alliances and diplomatic maneuvers between India and Sri Lanka have undergone significant shifts since the 1980s, influenced by regional power dynamics, geopolitical considerations, and the evolving priorities of both nations. This subheading explores the changing landscape of political alliances and the strategic maneuvers employed by India and Sri Lanka to safeguard their interests.

During the early years of the ethnic conflict, India positioned itself as a mediator and advocate for the Tamil cause. India's intervention in Sri Lanka was largely driven by its domestic Tamil population and concerns over regional stability. However, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 dramatically altered India's approach and its perception of the conflict. The incident led to a reevaluation of alliances and a shift in India's stance towards supporting the Sri Lankan government in its fight against the LTTE.

India's strategic shift prompted Sri Lanka to diversify its diplomatic alliances. Sri Lanka sought closer ties with other regional powers, particularly China, which emerged as a key player in the region. China's increasing economic investments and infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka, such as the Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City, provided an alternative source of support and counterbalance to India's influence.

The deepening ties between China and Sri Lanka triggered concerns in India about China's expanding presence in its neighborhood. India responded by intensifying its diplomatic efforts to maintain its influence in Sri Lanka and the broader Indian Ocean region. It sought to strengthen ties with other countries in the region, such as Japan and the United States, through initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on India-Sri Lanka cooperation, with efforts to bridge the gaps and build trust. India has emphasized its "Neighborhood First" policy, offering assistance in various sectors such as infrastructure development, defense cooperation, and economic collaboration. Sri Lanka, recognizing the importance of balancing its relations with regional powers, has pursued a more balanced approach by engaging with both India and China.

The shifting political alliances and diplomatic maneuvers in the India-Sri Lanka relationship reflect the complexities of the regional power play. Both countries have navigated a delicate balance, seeking to protect their national interests while also acknowledging the benefits of collaboration. The strategic choices made by India and Sri Lanka in their diplomatic engagements have shaped the dynamics of the relationship, contributing to a delicate interplay of influence and cooperation in the region.

As the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, India and Sri Lanka will likely continue to adapt their political alliances and diplomatic strategies to safeguard their interests and maintain regional stability. The relationship between the two countries will be influenced by factors such as economic interdependence, security concerns, and the evolving regional dynamics, making it crucial for both sides to navigate the complexities of their partnerships in a rapidly changing world.

### **Post-War Reconciliation: India's Role in Sri Lanka's Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Efforts**

In the aftermath of the long and devastating civil war in Sri Lanka, India played a significant role in supporting post-war reconciliation, reconstruction, and rehabilitation efforts. This subheading explores India's involvement and its contributions to the healing and rebuilding process in Sri Lanka.

Following the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009, Sri Lanka faced immense challenges in terms of rehabilitating displaced persons, rebuilding infrastructure, and promoting ethnic reconciliation. India recognized the importance of addressing these issues to ensure lasting peace and stability in its neighboring country.

India extended its support in various ways, including providing financial assistance for post-war reconstruction projects in Sri Lanka. India's assistance covered a wide range of sectors, such as housing, transportation, health, education, and agriculture. Infrastructure projects, including the restoration of roads, bridges, and railway lines, were undertaken to improve connectivity and facilitate the movement of people and goods.

India's role in the post-war period also encompassed assistance in resettlement and livelihood development for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Efforts were made to provide housing, basic amenities, and vocational training to help affected communities rebuild their lives and regain economic independence. The Indian Housing Project, for instance, aimed to construct houses for displaced families, providing them with a sense of security and stability.

In addition to these tangible contributions, India actively engaged in diplomatic initiatives to promote post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka. India supported the establishment of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), which aimed to address issues related to accountability, human rights, and ethnic reconciliation. India encouraged the Sri Lankan government to implement the recommendations of the LLRC and pursue a political solution that would accommodate the aspirations of all communities.

Cultural exchanges and people-to-people interactions also played a crucial role in post-war reconciliation efforts. India facilitated visits by Tamil community leaders, artists, and academics, fostering dialogue and cultural understanding between different communities in Sri Lanka. Scholarships and educational opportunities were provided to Sri Lankan students, promoting knowledge sharing and fostering a sense of goodwill between the two nations.

India's role in Sri Lanka's post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts exemplifies its commitment to regional stability and its recognition of the importance of inclusive development. By providing assistance, engaging in diplomatic initiatives, and promoting cultural exchanges, India aimed to contribute to the healing process and support Sri Lanka in building a more inclusive and harmonious society.

While challenges remain in terms of achieving full reconciliation and addressing the grievances of all communities, India's role in post-war efforts has been significant. The continued cooperation and collaboration between India and Sri Lanka in the post-war period have laid the foundation for long-term stability, peace, and development in the region.

### **Cultural Exchanges and People-to-People Connections: Strengthening Bonds**

Cultural exchanges and people-to-people connections have played a vital role in strengthening the bonds between India and Sri Lanka. These interactions have fostered a deeper understanding, appreciation, and goodwill between the people of both nations, transcending political and historical barriers. This subheading explores the significance of cultural exchanges and people-to-people connections in enhancing the bilateral relationship.

India and Sri Lanka share a rich cultural heritage and historical ties dating back centuries. Cultural exchanges serve as a platform for celebrating these shared traditions, promoting cultural diversity, and nurturing mutual respect. These exchanges encompass various aspects, including art, music, dance, literature, cuisine, and religious practices.

The cultural connections between India and Sri Lanka are evident in the influence of Indian traditions on Sri Lankan art forms, such as dance and music. The classical dance forms of Sri Lanka, such as Kandyan and Sabaragamuwa, showcase the influence of South Indian classical dance styles. Similarly, Sri Lankan music has been influenced by Indian classical and folk music traditions.

Artists, musicians, and dancers from both countries regularly engage in cultural exchanges, participating in festivals, performances, and workshops. These interactions provide opportunities for artists to learn from each other, collaborate, and showcase their talents. Cultural troupes from India frequently visit Sri Lanka, and vice versa, contributing to the vibrant cultural landscape of both nations.

Literary exchanges have also been instrumental in fostering cultural understanding. Indian and Sri Lankan authors have explored shared historical narratives, social issues, and cultural experiences through their writings. Literary festivals and book fairs serve as platforms for dialogue, intellectual exchange, and the promotion of literature as a medium for bridging gaps and building connections.

Religious ties also form a significant aspect of the cultural exchanges between India and Sri Lanka. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam are major religions in both countries, and pilgrimage sites in both nations attract devotees from across borders. The sacred city of Kandy in Sri Lanka, home to the Temple of the Tooth Relic, holds religious significance for both Sri Lankans and Indian devotees.

Beyond the realms of art, music, literature, and religion, people-to-people connections have been strengthened through tourism, educational exchanges, and business collaborations. The flow of tourists between India and Sri Lanka has increased over the years, with visitors experiencing the cultural diversity, historical sites, and natural beauty of both nations. Educational institutions and universities have facilitated student exchanges, allowing young minds to gain exposure to different cultures and perspectives.

These cultural exchanges and people-to-people connections serve as a foundation for building lasting bonds between India and Sri Lanka. They foster mutual respect, appreciation, and understanding, transcending political differences and historical complexities. By celebrating shared cultural heritage and embracing diversity, India and Sri Lanka strengthen their bilateral relationship, paving the way for a more harmonious and collaborative future.

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, cultural exchanges and people-to-people connections will continue to play a crucial role in promoting dialogue, enhancing understanding, and fostering enduring friendships between the people of India and Sri Lanka.

### **Contemporary Challenges and Future Prospects: Navigating the Path Ahead**

The India-Sri Lanka relationship faces contemporary challenges that require careful navigation and concerted efforts to ensure a mutually beneficial and sustainable partnership. This subheading delves into the key challenges and future prospects for the bilateral relationship, highlighting the areas that need attention and the opportunities for greater collaboration.

One of the primary challenges is addressing the concerns of minority communities in Sri Lanka, particularly the Tamil community. The historical grievances and demands for greater political autonomy and rights need to be addressed to foster a sense of inclusivity and reconciliation. India's role as a trusted partner and facilitator in this process will be crucial in supporting Sri Lanka's efforts to achieve a durable political solution that accommodates the aspirations of all communities.

Another challenge lies in managing competing regional and global interests. As both India and Sri Lanka navigate their relationships with other major powers, such as China, the United States, and Japan, they must balance their strategic priorities while safeguarding their sovereignty and national interests. Open and transparent communication, mutual trust, and dialogue will be essential in minimizing misunderstandings and aligning their interests.

Economic cooperation and trade relations also face challenges that require attention. Addressing non-tariff barriers, streamlining trade processes, and enhancing connectivity will facilitate greater trade and investment between the two countries. Efforts to diversify the trade basket, promote value-added exports, and explore new sectors of collaboration will contribute to a more robust economic partnership.

Environmental sustainability and climate change pose shared challenges for both nations. Protecting natural resources, mitigating climate risks, and promoting sustainable development require collaboration and knowledge-sharing. Joint initiatives in renewable energy, conservation, and climate resilience can pave the way for a greener and more sustainable future.

People-to-people connections, cultural exchanges, and tourism have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Overcoming the challenges posed by the pandemic and revitalizing these avenues of interaction will be crucial for strengthening mutual understanding and fostering greater people-to-people ties.

Looking ahead, there are promising prospects for the India-Sri Lanka relationship. Both countries share common values, historical linkages, and geographical proximity, which provide a strong foundation for collaboration in various fields. The focus on connectivity initiatives, such as the Indo-Pacific region's development and the BIMSTEC framework, presents opportunities for enhanced trade, connectivity, and regional integration.

In addition, leveraging technology and digital innovation can drive collaboration in sectors such as information technology, e-commerce, and digital governance. Cooperation in areas such as healthcare, education, and research and development can also contribute to mutual growth and development.

As the relationship evolves, sustained political engagement, trust-building measures, and regular high-level interactions will be critical. A forward-looking approach that balances the aspirations and interests of both countries, while addressing contemporary challenges, will shape the future prospects of the India-Sri Lanka relationship.

By fostering greater understanding, collaboration, and mutual respect, India and Sri Lanka can navigate the path ahead, building a stronger, more prosperous, and resilient partnership that serves the interests of their peoples and contributes to regional stability and development.

## Conclusion

The India-Sri Lanka relationship since the 1980s has witnessed a complex interplay of factors, shaped by historical events, ethnic tensions, shifting alliances, and evolving priorities. Despite the challenges faced along the way, both countries have demonstrated a commitment to strengthening their bilateral ties and fostering regional stability.

Through this article, we have explored various aspects of the India-Sri Lanka relationship, including the emergence of ethnic conflict, India's involvement in Sri Lanka's peace process, the impact of the Rajiv Gandhi assassination, economic cooperation, political alliances, post-war reconciliation, cultural exchanges, and future prospects.

While acknowledging the challenges and complexities, it is essential to recognize the strides made in recent years towards greater cooperation, understanding, and collaboration. The efforts to promote post-war reconciliation, enhance economic ties, strengthen cultural exchanges, and navigate contemporary challenges reflect the commitment of both nations to building a mutually beneficial and sustainable partnership.

As we look to the future, it is imperative for India and Sri Lanka to continue their dialogue, engage in open and transparent communication, and explore avenues for cooperation in diverse areas such as trade, connectivity, environment, technology, and people-to-people exchanges. By working together, both countries can overcome challenges, leverage opportunities, and forge a path of shared prosperity and regional stability.

The India-Sri Lanka relationship holds immense potential, driven by shared values, cultural ties, and geographical proximity. With a forward-looking approach, a focus on inclusivity, and a commitment to addressing the concerns of all communities, India and Sri Lanka can navigate the path ahead, building a stronger foundation for peace, development, and collaboration in the years to come.

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