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## Sri Lanka's India Equation- Rhetoric and Reality.

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By Prof. V. Suryanarayan

The victory of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the Presidential election held on November 16, 2019, with a massive mandate, not unexpected by Sri Lanka watchers in India, opens a new chapter in Sri Lanka's history and also in Sri Lanka-India relations.

Gotabaya is a controversial figure; while the majority Sinhalese adores him as a "savior" and a "war hero", the minority Tamils (Sri Lankan Tamils and hill country Tamils) and the Muslims view his ascendancy with fear and trepidation. The EU Election Observation Mission in its report has mentioned that the election was largely free of violence and technically well – managed. However unregulated campaign funding, abuse of state resources and media bias did not provide a level playing field for all candidates.

Gotabaya in his campaign highlighted that if elected he would restore law and order in the country. It was music to the ears of the majority Sinhalese, especially in the wake of ISIS-inspired bombings last Easter, that left more than 250 dead and at least 500 injured. The fact that external intelligence agencies, including India, warned Colombo about possible attacks, added to the discomfiture of Sirisena-Ranil team. Other contributory factors included the rift between the President and the Prime Minister, increasing corruption, mounting cost of living and rising unemployment.

The Rajapaksa family is virtually ruling the country. Gotabaya is the President; Mahinda is the Prime Minister and also in charge of key portfolios –finance, economic affairs, policy development, Buddha Sasana, water supply, urban development and housing and Chamal Rajapaksa is another member of the cabinet, who is in charge of the Mahaveli development, agriculture and trade. In Sinhalese perception the return of the Rajapaksas to power symbolizes the ascendancy of the *Ruhune*, the deep south which had always been in the forefront of Sinhalese sub-nationalism.

Two important consequences must be highlighted. Voting has followed ethnic lines and naturally ethnic polarization has widened. Because of several acts omission and commission committed by the Tigers, the Tamil struggle for autonomy and participatory democracy has suffered serious reverses. The functioning of the elected governments in the northern and eastern provinces is nothing much to rave about. Even on issues relating to development activities in these two provinces the elected governments are often ignored. Equally relevant, on the crucial question of accountability for the war crimes, demanded by UN Human Rights Agencies, Sri Lanka is unlikely to take any positive steps. The three brothers are strong Sinhala nationalists and are determined to whitewash the crimes committed by the trigger-happy armed forces during the Fourth Eelam War. A winter of discontent is ahead of Sri Lanka.

Soon after Gotabaya was sworn in as President, S. Jaishankar, Minister for External Affairs, Government of India, called on the President, offered congratulations and good wishes and invited the President to visit New Delhi at the earliest. What exactly transpired during the talks is not known, but according to media sources Jaishankar conveyed New Delhi's expectation that Sri Lankan Government "will take forward the process of national reconciliation, to arrive at a solution that meets the aspirations of Tamil population for equality, justice, peace and dignity". President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is visiting New Delhi on November 29, his first state visit after becoming the President. The visit underlines the importance that Colombo attaches to its relations with India.

### **India: Main Focus of Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy**

In his first major interview, Gotabaya Rajapaksa told the well-known Indian journalist Nitin Gokhale that Sri Lanka wants to be a "neutral country". It does not want to be a "bandwagon country" and it cannot survive if "we get into the balancing act". More important the President added giving Hambantota "on lease for 99 years" by the previous government "was a mistake". He added that Hambantota is "strategically important, economically important" and giving that "is not acceptable". He added "we should have control. We have to negotiate". Is this only an attempt to accuse the Ranil-Sirisena team of bartering away the sovereignty of Sri Lanka? Will China re-negotiate with Colombo and give away a crucial strategic asset in the Indian Ocean region?

On the proposed visit to India Gotabaya said, "I will reassure the Indian Government that we will work with India as a friendly country. We will not do anything that will harm the security interests (of India)". On the question of "reconciliation process with the minorities" Gotabaya did not touch upon the political and constitutional measures that his government will undertake but emphatically maintained that "development is

the answer”. He added that the leaders of both Sinhalese and Tamils were speaking about things “that are not practical, impossible, only to fool the people”. He added that every citizen of the country should be given an opportunity “to live as a Sri Lankan, to get an education, live a better life, get a good job and live in dignity. I will create that environment”.

India- Sri Lanka bilateral relations since independence have undergone several twists and turns, confounding friends and critics alike. But the crucial statement made by the Sri Lankan President in his interview with Nitin Gokhale that Sri Lanka “will not do anything that will harm the security interests (of India)” has to be analysed in greater detail. For if we do not learn from history, we will be condemned to re-live it.

### **Love-hate relations**

All aspects of Sri Lankan life – demography, history, religion, language, art, literature, politics, even dress and cuisine – have been profoundly influenced by India. In 1927, Mahatma Gandhi, on the invitation extended by the Jaffna Youth Congress, visited Ceylon to popularise Khadi and prohibition. Gandhiji spoke at several places touching upon Buddha’s heritage, temperance, khadi and untouchability. According to Rajaji, who accompanied Gandhiji during his visit to Ceylon, Gandhiji’s visit was an “unprecedented triumphal march”.

Gandhiji was so impressed by all-pervasive Indian influence that he referred to Ceylon as “India’s daughter state”. During his visit to Jaffna he referred to Ceylon as “India glorified”. Struck by the natural beauty of the country, Gandhiji told that Ceylon “surpassed all my expectations and so I could not help saying that Ceylon seemed to me a fragrant beautiful pearl dropped from the nasal ring of India”. He expressed the hope that the people of Ceylon “who have inherited and adopted the teachings of the Great Master (Gautama Buddha) do better than the children of the Motherland”.

Though a proclaimed agnostic, Jawaharlal Nehru was fascinated by the life and teachings of Gautama Buddha. Nehru never failed to visit the Samadhi statue of the Buddha in Anuradhapura whenever he visited the Island. When he was in Dehradun jail, a Ceylonese friend sent him a picture of this statue and it became his constant companion. In *Discovery of India* Nehru has written that “it became a precious companion for me and the strong calm features of Buddha’s statue soothed me and gave me strength and helped me to overcome many a period of depression”. No wonder that when the Constituent Assembly debated on the selection of the national flag it unanimously adopted the flag of the Indian National Congress, with the Charkha being replaced by the Ashoka Chakra, indicating that Dharma will guide India’s policies and programmes.

It must be pointed out that in Sri Lanka there is wide divergence between theory and practice of Buddhism. In his absorbing book, *Buddhism Betrayed*, Prof. Stanley Tambiah raised the embarrassing question: “If Buddhism preaches non-violence why is there so much of political violence in Sri Lanka today?”. The book carries in the front cover, the photograph of a Buddhist monk shrieking and shouting. There is no *Karuna* (compassion) in his face there is only *Raudra* (anger). It needs to be highlighted that the assassin who killed S W R D Bandaranaike was a Buddhist monk. And the monks had been in the forefront in preaching intolerance and even violence against the

minorities, whether Tamils or Muslims.

### **Minority Complex of the Majority Community**

Though the Sinhalese constitute three fourths of the island's population, they do not look at the Tamils as minority groups, but as those who have links with South India with no loyalty to the island Republic. It is a well-entrenched attitude. This idea got further strengthened because the island was subjected to frequent invasions from South India during the Chola period. In recent times the discomfiture has been strengthened by wild statements made by the leaders of the Dravidian parties that India should resort to military means to solve the ethnic problem.

The ever present fear of the giant in the north made the Sinhalese leaders seek external help to "checkmate" India. Thus, instead of reciprocating the good will expressed by Jawaharlal Nehru Ceylon entered into a defence agreement with Britain which permitted the latter to station British troops in Ceylon. It was justified by Sir John Kotelawala, the Ceylonese Prime Minister, who said, "the day Ceylon dispensed with Englishmen completely, the island would go under India".

### **J V P Revolt and the Bangladeshi Crisis**

Faced with the internal security threat posed by the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) in April 1971, Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike asked for external assistance. The first country to respond spontaneously was India. A senior diplomat then working in the Indian High Commission told me that he took the next available flight to Thiruvananthapuram, telephoned then Foreign Secretary T N Kaul who, in turn, got in touch with the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The Government of India acted swiftly. The Indian Air Force planes within minutes flew from Bangalore to Colombo to defend the Katunayake airport. The Indian naval ships from Chennai and Kochi sailed to Colombo to defend the Colombo harbor. The JVP revolt was easily put down; a State of Emergency was proclaimed and large number of Sinhalese youth were detained without trial.

How did Colombo respond to these gestures of goodwill? Six months later, during the East Pakistani crisis, when India had banned over flights by Pakistani planes over Indian Territory, Sri Lanka provided transit and re-fuelling facilities for Pakistani air force planes and soldiers on their way from West Pakistan to East Pakistan to carry on savage reprisals against Bangladeshi nationalists. Was it not an act which went against Indian interests? In that process did not Sri Lanka collude with Pakistan and go against the wishes of the overwhelming majority of East Pakistanis who wanted freedom from Pakistani domination?

### **India's Nuclear Programmes and Sri Lankan Response**

During the 1970's one of the major foreign policy initiatives of Sirimavo Bandaranaike was to get the Indian Ocean declared as a Zone of

Peace. With the support of non-aligned countries, especially India, Sri Lanka was able to muster majority in the UN General Assembly to get the IOPZ resolution passed in October 1971. But with India's growing nuclear capability Colombo began to change its stance. It began to support the Pakistani proposal for making South Asia a nuclear weapons free zone. What is more, when India "imploded" the bomb in May 1974 anti-India sentiments came out into the open. In addition to concerns about super power rivalry, Colombo began to express fears about India's nuclear capabilities. Sri Lankan diplomat Shirley Amarasinghe remarked: "We do not want any great power here. We do not intend to drive out Satan by Beelzebug and allow some other powers within the group of littoral and hinterland states to take up the place of superpowers".

It must be highlighted that when India exercised the nuclear option and exploded the bomb in Pokhran in May 2008 there was an enlightened government in Colombo. Lakshman Kadiragamar was the Minister for External Affairs, who did not believe in checkmating India, but in promoting bilateral relations. He was conscious of the fact that India is the best guarantor of the stability and security of Sri Lanka and welcomed India's initiative.

### **Induction of IPKF:**

The induction of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), on the invitation of President Jayewardene under the provisions of the India Sri Lanka Accord, enabled the Sri Lankan army to withdraw from the north and the east and concentrate itself in tackling the JVP threat. The JVP, it may be recalled, after 1987 India-Sri Lanka Accord, gave up its earlier form of class struggle and transformed itself as a champion of Sinhala nationalism. Unprecedented violence was unleashed by the JVP. For few weeks, according to many impartial observers, the security situation in southern parts of Sri Lanka began to turn against the Government. But gradually the Sri Lankan army got an upper hand. During those turbulent days, *Bheeshana Samaya*, days of terror, as the Sinhalese refer to it, the two rivers of exquisite beauty in Sri Lanka, Mahaweli Ganga and Kelaniya Ganga, were clogged with dead bodies and foamed with blood. Gradually the army got the upper hand and the JVP revolt was crushed.

What is instructive for us in India is the fact that the military marginalization of the Tigers, accomplished at heavy cost of men and materials, did not earn for India the corresponding gratitude of the Sinhalese. On the contrary it gave a fillip to Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism and provided justification for the argument that Sri Lanka would soon become the client state of India. What was more embarrassing for New Delhi was the fact that the hitherto two antagonistic entities, Prabhakaran and President Premadasa, came together. It is well known that President Premadasa provided lot of money and weapons to the Tigers to fight against the IPKF. However, in the end, Premadasa had to pay for the wages of sin. He fell victim to the cult of the bomb and the bullet perfected by the Tigers.

In his memoirs, *My Days in Sri Lanka*, Ambassador Lakhan Mehrotra, who was High Commissioner from April 1989 to June 1990, narrates the policy of brinkmanship practiced by President Premadasa. Sri Lanka was toyng with the idea of abrogating the India-Sri Lanka Accord by an Act of Parliament, recalling the Sri Lankan High Commissioner from New Delhi, thus leading to "rupture" in diplomatic relations. President

Premadasa threatened B G Deshmukh, Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was sent to Colombo as a “special envoy” that he would declare the IPKF as an “occupying force” which would sully India’s name. In a fit of anger Premadasa told Deshmukh that he would “commit suicide” if his request for the IPKF to cease its operations against the LTTE was not met before July 1989.

The wheel turned full circle again. When the military crisis deepened during the Third Eelam War, after the fall of the Elephant Pass to the Tigers in April 2000, and the Tigers were ready to re-enter Jaffna, their former stronghold, not only Sri Lankan Government, but even the hard core sections of the JVP pleaded for Indian military intervention. Having burnt its fingers already, New Delhi turned down the request.

### **Indian Naval Diplomacy at Its Best**

When Tsunami struck Sri Lanka in December 2004 the Indian response was spontaneous. Though a victim of Tsunami itself, the Government of India immediately mobilised its resources and extended timely help to its immediate neighbours – Sri Lanka, Maldives, Thailand and Indonesia. India was the first country to send assistance to Sri Lanka - within hours – after the Tsunami which claimed over 30,000 lives in the coastal districts spread across the northern, eastern, southern and southwestern parts of the island. Indian relief workers were involved in a range of operations, including emergency medical aid, the setting up of relief camps, clearing debris and reconstructing damaged bridges. The magnificent role played by the Indian Navy constitutes one of the golden chapters of India’s naval history and diplomacy. It included the mapping of the Colombo harbor which was completed effectively and swiftly.

It must be pointed out that Tsunami, which wrought havoc in Indonesia, had the effect of bringing together the Achenese rebels and the Indonesian Government, which paved the way for the settlement of the Achenese separatist problem. Hope entertained by Indian observers that a similar denouement will take place in Sri Lanka did not materialize due to the intransigence of both sides – Sri Lankan Government and the separatist Tigers. As a result, Indian assistance extended to Sri Lanka did not reach the Tamils in the north and the east to the extent India would have liked.

### **India and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)**

We can choose our friends, but not our neighbours. What is more, in South Asia we cannot make a clear distinction between domestic developments and foreign policy. To illustrate, if there are Hindu-Muslim riots in India, the Muslims in neighbouring countries will naturally get agitated. If religious conversion on a mass scale takes place in Bangladesh and Pakistan and if the Hindu minority is pressurised/coerced to embrace Islam, the Hindus in India will be concerned. If the Tamils in Sri Lanka are discriminated against by the Sinhalese-dominated governments, the Tamils in Tamil Nadu will naturally get agitated and will express their support and sympathy to their Tamil brethren across the Palk Strait. Keeping this reality in mind we in India have to evolve a realistic neighbourhood policy. As the dominant power in the region, which lies at the very centre of South Asia, India has the responsibility of preventing genocide in neighbouring countries. In other words, in its foreign policy, New Delhi must uphold, both in letter and spirit, the “Responsibility to Protect (R2P)”.

The R2P is a revolutionary doctrine in the theory and practice of international relations. Promulgated by Australian visionary and former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, who had taken keen interest in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, the theory is gathering support and momentum in different parts of the world. It was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly at the 2006 World Summit, but has not been implemented because of the strong opposition put forward by states who are taking shelter behind state sovereignty to commit genocidal crimes against their own people.

In simple words, R2P spells out that the primary responsibility of protecting the people from mass atrocity lies with the State itself. As Gareth Evans has aptly put it, “State sovereignty implies responsibility, not license to kill”. But when a State is unable or unwilling to take responsibility, the international community cannot turn a Nelson’s eye to gross violations of human rights. The international community should take preventive action. R2P’s primary tools are persuasion and support, not military or other coercive methods. But when all means fail, then the alternative of military intervention should be considered.

Sri Lanka, as Prime Minister Indira Gandhi said in 1983, is “not just another country” and what happens in the island will have its repercussions in India. If fire rages in your neighbourhood, you must extinguish the fire before it engulfs you. This policy was adhered to by New Delhi in the case of Sri Lanka even before the ethnic fratricide in July 1983. Three illustrations are given below to substantiate this point.

#### 1. India’s Response to ethnic riots in 1958

The first organized violence against the Tamils took place in Colombo in 1958 and death and destruction were the order of the day. Y D Gundevia, who was then Indian High Commissioner in Colombo, met Governor General Oliver Goonetilleke and candidly told him that the Tamils in Colombo were feeling unsafe in the national capital. Ambassador Gundevia suggested that it was better to shift them to the safety and security of Jaffna peninsula. The Governor General concurred with this view and with Indian assistance ships were arranged and those Tamils who wanted to leave Colombo were transported to Kankesenturai. There were few hundred Sinhalese living in the Northern Province at that time, mainly involved in the bakery business. Their lives were not in danger, but as a precautionary measure,

they were brought back to the Sinhalese areas.

During the height of the Fourth Eelam War I used to narrate this incident in several forums and used to plead that India should take the initiative, get in touch with the United States and member States of the European Union and persuade/pressurise the President to declare a cease fire so that innocent people who were caught between the Sinhalese Lions and the Tamil Tigers could be rescued and taken to safe areas. Unfortunately, my voice turned out to be a voice in the wilderness. And, what is more deplorable, when the Tiger guerrillas got in touch with the Indian diplomats and told them that they would like to surrender they were asked to approach the Sri Lankan armed forces and hold aloft the white flag of surrender. As the international Human Rights Organisations have pointed out some of those who held aloft the white flag were also mercilessly shot down. Thus, India became an unwilling accomplice to a dastardly crime. As Lady Macbeth put it, "There is the smell of the blood still. And all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten my little hand".

## 2. Organised Riots in Plantation Areas, 1981

The second illustration pertains to the organized riots which took place in the plantation areas in the middle of 1981 engineered by powerful forces within the United National Party (UNP) and carried out by lumpen sections of Sinhalese population. Their objective was apparent – to drive out as many Indian origin Tamils to India before the Sirimavo-Shastri Pact expired in October 1981. The Indian High Commissioner Thomas Abraham deputed two of his junior colleagues, Gopal Krishna Gandhi and Ranjan Mathai to the plantation areas to make an on-the-spot study of the situation. Gopal Gandhi and Ranjan Mathai reported that the riots were pre-planned and were masterminded by leading members of the ruling party. Thomas Abraham immediately went to the riot affected areas, though W T Jayasinghe, then Foreign and Defence Secretary, tried to dissuade him on the plea that the Government will not be able to provide him adequate security. Thomas Abraham told W T Jayasinghe: "I am going to meet my people. I do not require your security. Courtesy demands that when the High Commissioner leaves the capital he should inform the foreign office". Thomas Abraham was shocked by the senseless violence taking place in the plantation areas. In one of his memorable statements, which made many of us proud, Thomas Abraham declared that if the Sri Lankan Government could not restore law and order and provide security to the Indian Tamils, India will have to think in terms of taking its own steps. The chauvinist elements in Sri Lanka accused Thomas Abraham of interfering in the internal affairs of the country. But Thomas Abraham stuck to his principled stand. The warning sent shock waves through the Sinhalese establishment. President Jayewardene acted swiftly and normalcy was returned to the hill country.

## 3. India and Emergency Regulations

The third illustration took place in July 1983, when Shankar Bajpai was additional Secretary in charge of Sri Lanka and Bernard Tilakaratne was Sri Lankan High Commissioner in New Delhi. Five days before the ethnic fratricide took place in Colombo, Shankar Bajpai summoned Bernard Tilakaratne to the Foreign Office and told him about India's concerns "about what is happening in Sri Lanka". Bajpai made particular



reference to the Emergency Regulations that were operative in Jaffna permitting disposal of the dead without inquests. The Sri Lankan envoy ventured to ask whether the concern was conveyed from Tamil Nadu. He was told that the concern was being expressed “at the highest political level”. Understandably the Sri Lankan press reacted with unprecedented hysteria. It accused India of “meddling in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka”. “Big Brother, shut up” was the screaming headline in a leading newspaper.

Much water has flowed through the Ganga, Kaveri and the Mahaveli since then and Indian policy towards the island became one of bending backwards to placate its southern neighbour. Another incident deserves mention. During the height of the Fourth Eelam War when civilian casualties were very high, the South Block expressed its concern through the website. The senior officials did not even want to summon the High Commissioner to express India’s concern.

### **Continuing Ambivalence on Devolution to Provinces**

The greatest threat to nation building in Sri Lanka comes from the Sinhalese perception that Sri Lanka is a Sinhala-Buddhist state and the minorities have to adjust themselves to Sinhalese supremacy. The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which was introduced after India-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987 provided for the substance of federalism in a unitary state. A review of developments since 1987 clearly illustrates that the limited devolution to the provinces is being progressively undone by successive governments. The merger of the North and the East, an article of faith as far as the Tamils are concerned, has been undone by a judicial pronouncement. Mahinda Rajapaksa has made it clear that police powers will not be devolved to the provinces. The composition of an upper house to protect the interests of the federal units has become a forgotten chapter. The bureaucracy is still dominated by the Sinhalese. The armed forces are predominantly Sinhalese. The military presence in the north and the east continues and the job opportunities created as a result of development activities is grabbed by the Sinhalese.

In multi-ethnic societies we must make a clear distinction between citizenship and nationality. Citizenship implies political loyalty to the state irrespective of ethnic origin. You may be a Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim, but you are a citizen of Sri Lanka and your loyalty is to the Sri Lankan state. The second pertains to nationality, which includes cultural moorings. You are a Tamil, you follow Tamil culture, you practice Hindu religion and you have your education through the Tamil language, while being a loyal citizen of Sri Lanka. In other words, the success of nation building will depend upon the nature of political system. If the political system provides sufficient space for multiple identities to co-exist harmoniously the nation building experiment is on the right track. But if it does not provide for tolerance of multiple identities, tensions and fissures will develop. A meaningful solution to the problem of ethnicity and nation building can be found only if the political system enshrines tolerance, devolution, power sharing and autonomy.

### **India-Sri Lanka Relations – Coming Months**

Let us hope that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his team will discuss all these problems in a free and frank atmosphere. If the past is

an illustration, India carries no ill will towards Sri Lanka and would like the island republic to emerge as a happy and harmonious nation. One problem which New Delhi faces today is to take the political parties of Tamil Nadu along. The AIADMK Government and the opposition Dravidian parties still harp on events of the past and live in a world of make believe. They do not understand that a policy of confrontation will only result in Sri Lanka's increasing dependence on China for economic, political and strategic survival.

With the co-operation of Tamil Nadu New Delhi can resume the shipping service between Rameshwaram and Talaimannar. It would give a fillip to the promotion of trade and cultural relations. The connectivity between the two countries can be developed further if the proposal made by Ranil Wikramasinghe to have a land bridge gets translated into action. Tamil Nadu can contribute a lot for the amelioration of 70,000 war widows who continue to live in poverty and destitution. Educational opportunities in Tamil Nadu should be enhanced so that Sri Lankan Tamils can come to Tamil Nadu for higher education. It should be pointed out that among the very first graduates of Madras University, which was started in 1857, were two Sri Lankan Tamils – Viswanatha Pillai and Thamodaran Pillai. I can multiply the opportunities for fruitful co-operation between the two countries.

## **Conclusion**

The greatness of a nation, Mahatma Gandhi once said, depends upon how secure the minorities feel in that country. Twelve days before his assassination, Gandhiji wrote in the *Harijan*: “All Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Jews, who people this vast sub-continent and have adopted it as their own motherland, have an equal right to it. No one has a right to say that it belongs to the majority community only and that the minority community can only remain there as an underdog”.

“What we call the beginning” T S Eliot wrote years ago “is often the end”. “And to make an end is a beginning. The end is where we start from”. In the beginning of this essay, I referred to Gandhiji's visit to Ceylon in 1927. Let me conclude the essay with another statement of Gandhiji. Speaking in the Nalanda Mahavidyalaya he appealed to the students to follow the teachings of the Buddha: “If you do not represent the teachings of the Buddha in your own lives, you having belonged to this institution will be considered useless ... You can reproduce the central teaching of the Gautama in your own lives... He gave us the unadulterated law of mercy –and he insisted upon purity of life”. Gandhiji was deeply pained by the growing canker of communalism in the island, but he held out the hope that if the Ceylonese adhered to the Master's teachings, to quote Gandhiji again, you “can outstrip us and set an example”.

*Dr. V. Suryanarayan is Founding Director and Senior Professor (Retired), Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Madras. His e mail id: [suryageeth@gmail.com](mailto:suryageeth@gmail.com)<sup>[1]</sup>*

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