

Golden Links between Myanmar and Sri Lanka after 1988

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Abstract

Myanmar and Sri Lanka had contacts since Buddha era. Their relations dated back to hundreds of years. From 1989 to 2004, there were no significant relations between the two countries. However, Myanmar and Sri Lanka had close contacts through exchange visits of the Heads of the State of the two countries. As the year 2009 was the sixtieth anniversary of Myanmar-Sri Lanka diplomatic relations (1949-2009), closer relations through reciprocal state visits between the two countries were found. After 1988, Myanmar Government practiced market-oriented economic reforms promoted external trade and foreign direct investment. Myanmar and Sri Lanka also attempted to extend economic ties through various trade missions and concluding some trade agreements. After 1988, Myanmar-Sri Lanka social relations became closer than the past. Since Myanmar-Sri Lanka Buddhist Association was founded in Myanmar in 1990 and Sri Lanka Association in Myanmar was formed in 1996, the people of the two countries had smoother social co-operations. Although Myanmar and Sri Lanka are not adjacent neighbouring countries, their long-lasting religious relation is the main factor behind the golden links between the two countries throughout the successive governments.

Introduction

Sri Lanka, officially called the 'Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka' is an island in the Indian Ocean about twenty-eight kilometres off the south-eastern coast of India. The Island's contact with the outside world began early. Beginning in 1505, Portuguese traders seized the Island and in 1815, the British made Sri Lanka a Crown Colony. Sri Lanka became independent on 4 February 1948. Sri Lankan politics since independence have been strongly democratic. Sri Lanka traditionally follows a nonaligned foreign policy. Sri Lanka is one of the countries which Myanmar established diplomatic relations soon after regaining her independence in 1948.

Sri Lanka and Myanmar have certain common features. Both countries believed that the Buddha visited both countries in his life time and Theravada Buddhism has flourished in both countries for centuries up to now. Moreover, the Fourth Great Buddhist Council (Sangayana or Synod) was held in Sri Lanka and the Fifth and Sixth Great Buddhist Council were held in Myanmar. Similarly, they are countries which border the Bay of Bengal and majority of the citizens (70% to 80%) of the two countries are Buddhists. Furthermore, both countries were colonized by the British.

Based on these factors, this research will trace some key factors affecting long lasting relations between the two countries as follows:

- Buddhist scholar monks, as well as laymen, Tipitakas books, Bodhi saplings and sacred relics of Lord Buddha were exchanged between Myanmar and Sri Lanka many centuries ago.
- Since ancient time, the two countries supported each other whenever one country requires helping hands.
- Uttarojiva and Chepata Mahathera (monk) deliberated religious study in Sri Lanka, and then returned to Myanmar in order to establish Sri Lankan styled Nikaya (religious order) in twelfth century.
- In fifteenth century, some Myanmar monks were sent to Sri Lanka by King Dhamaceti to be ordained at the Sima on the bank of Kalayani River in Sri Lanka

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with the purposes of purifying Buddhism and unifying of Myanmar monks through practising systematic orders of the Sinhalese order of ordination.

- Myanmar monks assisted Sri Lanka to establish Amarapura Nikaya in 1802 and Ramanna Nikaya in 1846 in Sri Lanka.

Due to century-old religious ties between the two governments, political, social, economic and people to people contact of the two states had successively developed till today.

Myanmar-Sri Lanka Relations after 1988

Myanmar and Sri Lanka had contacts since Buddha era. Their relations dated back to hundreds of years. The diplomatic relations between Myanmar and Sri Lanka started on 6 June 1949. The political and economic relations and social cooperation between the two countries after 1988 became closer than the past.

From 1989 to 2004, no significant state visits between Myanmar and Sri Lanka were found although there were ministerial level visits. In 2004, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa attended the World Buddhist Summit in Yangon, Myanmar. In 2007, the Prime Minister of Myanmar, Lieutenant General Thein Sein paid a goodwill visit to Sri Lanka in August 2007 at the invitation of the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Mr. Ratnasiri Wickramanayake. During the visit, Myanmar Prime Minister's handing over two full-grown tusked elephants to Buddha Tooth Relic Temple in Sri Lanka showed the religious based diplomatic relations between Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

In March 2009, Myanmar Foreign Minister's attending the South Asian Regional Ministerial Meeting held in Colombo conveyed the closer diplomatic relations between Myanmar and Sri Lanka. At the Meeting, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, Mr. Bogollagama revealed the participation of Myanmar and Sri Lanka in many regional and international agendas, including Sri Lanka's membership in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Asian Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) and Bay of Bengal Initiatives for Multisectorial and Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Sri Lankan Minister also insisted that Myanmar's support for Sri Lanka's application to become a Dialogue partner of ASEAN.

As the year 2009 was the sixtieth anniversary of Myanmar- Sri Lanka diplomatic relations (1949-2009), closer relations through reciprocal state visits between the two countries were found. President of Sri Lanka, Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa paid a goodwill visit to Myanmar in June 2009. During the visit, signing of MoU on tourism cooperation between Myanmar and Sri Lanka was the result of discussions made by the two leaders on promotion of political, economic and social cooperation between the two countries. In return, at the invitation of the President of Sri Lanka, the Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council, Senior General Than Shwe visited Sri Lanka in November 2009. During the visit, the two leaders discussed about mutual interests of the two countries and signing a MoU on religious cooperation between Shwedagon pagoda of Myanmar and Buddha Tooth Relic temple in Sri Lanka was a significance of the Chairman's visit.

After 1988, Myanmar Government practiced market-oriented economic reforms and promoted external trade and foreign direct investment. Myanmar and Sri Lanka also attempted to extend economic ties through various trade missions and concluding some agreements. There were trade co-operations between private business organizations of both countries such as UMFCCI and Ceylon Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI). Myanmar-Sri Lanka economic relations after 1988 were closer than the past.

After 1988, Myanmar-Sri Lanka social cooperation became closer than the past. Myanmar-Sri Lanka Buddhist Association was founded in Myanmar in 1990 and Sri Lanka Association in Myanmar was also founded in 1996 to have smoother social cooperation

between the people of Myanmar and Sri Lanka. In 2004, a milestone was set in religious relations between Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The World Buddhist Summit was held in Myanmar in December 2004. Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa attended the Summit and Venerable Sri Lankan monks took patronage role in the Summit.

In May 2008, when Myanmar delta area was seriously hit by the cyclone Nargis, Sri Lankan Government assisted cash and kinds in a large amount. Moreover, as a social welfare relief and resettlement of cyclone victims 'Metta Samadi' village was constructed in Kungyangone Township with donation of the Government of Sri Lanka. It included over 1000 houses and two primary schools. Moreover, in June 2009 when the President of Sri Lanka, Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa paid a goodwill visit to Myanmar, a great novitiation ceremony was held in Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. At the ceremony, totally sixty Myanmar young boys were novitiated and young girls were ear-bored by the Sri Lankan President as the commemoration of sixty years of Myanmar-Sri Lanka diplomatic relations. From those novitiated youths, twenty-eight novices and twenty-four nuns were invited to Sri Lanka for three-year Buddhist study. This Myanmar religious exchange group was the largest delegation in religious relations between Myanmar and Sri Lanka after 1988.

However, tourism sector in social cooperation between the two countries is not very significant. There were few exchange visits of pilgrimage tour between the two countries. In the development of pilgrimages between the two countries, the feasibility of granting visa waiver or reduction of visa fees to pilgrim group recommended by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and subject to suitable term should be considered. Similar concessions or waivers should be granted where fees are charged to enter pagoda for worship. The occasional group of pilgrims visiting from Myanmar to Sri Lanka was getting accommodated in Myanmar temples in Colombo, Kandy and Anuradhapura and they served as pilgrims rest houses. However, there is no special place in Myanmar for the Sri Lankan pilgrimage group. The Government of Myanmar should grant permission and place to build Sri Lankan owned pilgrimage rest houses in some places closed to famous religious places in Myanmar.

Conclusion

In sum, Myanmar and Sri Lanka have enjoyed close relations since the eleventh century. In particular, with sharing Theravada Buddhist heritage, the two countries pay respect to each other's social and cultural values and have stood together as intimate friends and allies through the centuries. These traditional ties have been further strengthened by the close contacts through the Non-Aligned Movement, ASEAN Regional forum, the Asian Cooperation Dialogue and within BIMSTEC. Although Myanmar and Sri Lanka maintain cordial political, diplomatic, religious and cultural relationship, the potential on the trade and investment fronts have not been fully realized and have not driven great momentum yet to reach the excellent condition.

After the total suppression the internal insurgents, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), the Government of Sri Lanka turned to the country's economic development and focused on the importance of South-South cooperation. Therefore, this is the golden opportunity for Myanmar and Sri Lanka to explore economic impetus and to expand the well-built foundation of the centuries old bilateral ties between Myanmar and Sri Lanka into new phase of cooperation, in particular in the economic sphere. Sri Lanka embarked upon a vigorous promotional drive to attract foreign direct investment, trade and economic opportunities that force her post-conflict development efforts. In commercial terms, Sri Lanka is a point of intersection of the major trade routes and sea lane across the Indian Ocean. Probably, the lack of awareness of potential in each other's market is a significant impediment to trade. Therefore, the two governments should be aware of the need for regular interactions

especially between the business communities of the two countries in order to enhance awareness of business opportunities between the two countries. Furthermore, the two governments should build upon the close interaction between the UMFCCI and the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce (CCC).

The First Meeting of Joint Commission between Myanmar and Sri Lanka was held in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, in July 2007. Similarly, the Second Meeting was also held in Colombo in August 2009. A key aspect of discussions that took place during the two meetings was to extend economic cooperation between the two countries. Although there is no investment of Myanmar in Sri Lanka, there have already been a number of significant investments in Sri Lanka by Southeast Asian countries. It is very clear that Sri Lanka can yield many profits to the foreign investors. Sri Lanka is also interested in trade, tourism, agriculture and forestry sectors of Myanmar. Sri Lanka has so far launched one million US dollars worth of investment in Myanmar since 1988. Sri Lanka would look forward to increasing this investment in Myanmar.

Between 2007 and 2008, Import from Myanmar to Sri Lanka increased by US\$ 1.2 million. There is potential to increase this trade flow further. Potential products that can be exported to Myanmar from Sri Lanka include: Agricultural chemicals, coffee, tea, spices, jewellery, biscuit, cosmetics, baby products, energy saving bulbs, ceramic and porcelain products, electric panels, switches and ceramic tiles. If Myanmar invests in Sri Lanka, she can benefit not only from Sri Lanka but also through Free Trade Agreements between Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan. The Agreement between Sri Lanka and India provides access to 4150 items on a zero tariff, while Pakistan provides for duty free access on 206 products from Sri Lanka to Pakistan. Therefore, the governments of Myanmar and Sri Lanka should encourage the business groups of the two countries to explore and create more opportunities through the regular exchange of visits by business delegations and enhanced cooperation between the Chambers of Commerce of the two countries.

This close interaction among entrepreneurs of the trade in both countries has paved the way for increased business opportunities for both countries. In conclusion, Myanmar and Sri Lanka have a broad range of historical relations constantly cultivated over the centuries. It is time now to strengthen the economic and trade cooperation based on well-founded diplomatic, political, religious, social and cultural ties between the two countries closer than the relations in the past time.

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