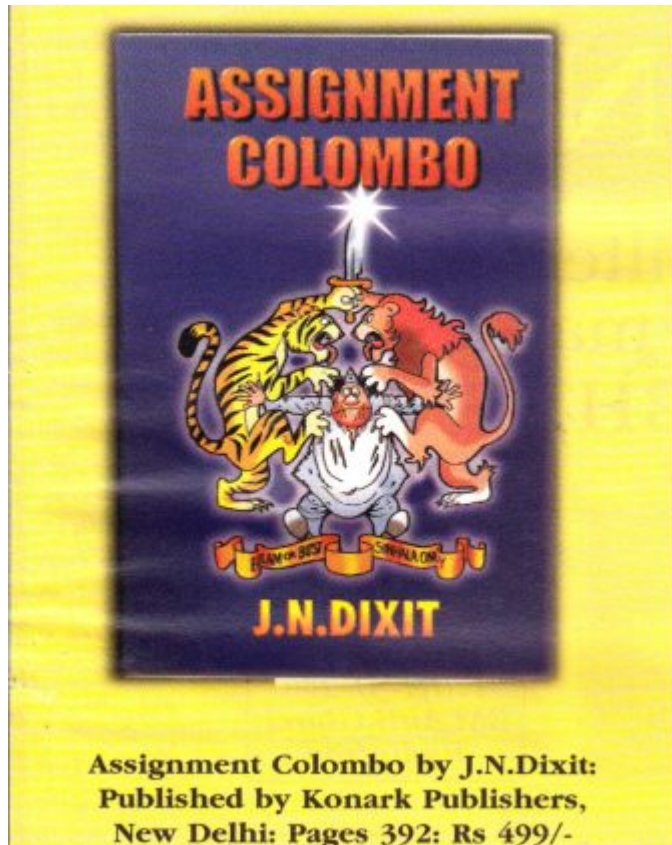


Assignment Colombo

Posted on



DURING THE NEARLY 50 YEARS as an independent nation, undoubtedly the worst crisis Sri Lanka ever faced was when India decided to violate the is land's sovereignty and send in planes to drop a cargo of food in Jaffna which the Government said it did not want. Such an act against neighbor Pakistan would have been considered an act of war but Sri Lankans had to merely protest that it was an unfriendly act and swallow the insult. Soon after, Indian troops arrived as part of the Indian Peace Keeping Force and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi nearly lost his head when a naval rating decided to vent his frustrations and feelings on the visiting dignitary. Whether India would have considered this an unfriendly act and what retaliatory measures it would have taken is a subject of debate even today in the parlors of intellectuals.

From the Sri Lankan side, many of those in the hot seats at the time, namely J.R.Jayewardene, R.Premadasa, Lalith Athulathmudali, Gamini Dissanayake, Ranjan

Wijeratne are dead and never gave their version of events in books. The stories they would have revealed would have thrown much light on events but alas the memoirs have gone to the graves with them. Except for JR, all the others met with violent deaths, and India's Rajiv Gandhi was no exception.

But one man who was in the hot seat on the Indian side was J.N.Dixit, the Indian ambassador in Sri Lanka, whom local journalists dubbed "The viceroy". He has now chosen to reveal all but the attempt to cover India's nakedness has unfortunately left both his country and himself further exposed, in the buff.

When Ralph Bultjens after talking to JR invited Indian foreign secretary Bhandari, Esmond Wickremasinghe and Ravi Jayewardene to a private dinner, Dixit was incensed that he, the Indian ambassador, had not been invited. 'I felt that my exclusion from this confabulation would reduce my credibility and authority in the eyes of my Sri Lanka interlocutors,' says Dixit and promptly rang JR to ask if there was any objection to him joining the dinner. JR said no, and Dixit rang Bultjens and said if he was not invited, he would see that Bhandari would not come either. Bultjens then invited Dixit and in Dixit's own words, 'I arrived at Bultjens dinner as a gate crasher'. Perhaps that was a dress rehearsal to the way he would behave during his stay in Sri Lanka, as at some stages there was concern as to who was running Sri Lanka - Dixit or JR?

The book shows Bhandari to be a pathetic figure for whom Dixit had little respect. Dixit says Bhandari had vague knowledge of Tamil leadership and gives one instance to spotlight this. "Mani, as soon as you reach Colombo Vijitha Yapa hand over the documents to Chelvanayakam,' Bhandari said. Dixit pointed out that S.J.V.Chelvanayakam had died two years ago and handing over the papers would not be possible. Perhaps he meant Dr Neelam Thiruchelvam? 'Mani, give the papers to Chelvanayakam, Thiruchelvam whosoever it is," said Bhandari and added, 'All these south Indian names are very confusing.

But Sri Lankan names seem to be confusing to Dixit too, judging by the incredible misspelling of common names: Harsh Abhayawardene, Cepal Attygalle, S.W.R.D.Bhandaranaike, Manick De Wela, Dutagamanu, W.T.Jai-singhe are only a few examples.

Dixit was conscious of his height and writes of a conversation with President Zia Ul-Haq of Pakistan in Colombo. Zia said he had come from Dhaka where the Indian High Commissioner was also short and in Colombo too he was meeting a short

diplomat. "What is the problem? Why cannot India find tall ambassadors?" he asked. Dixit replied, "The Government of India has perhaps decided to send short statured individuals like me to neighboring countries to dispel their apprehensions about India and to allay their worries about India's obvious stability and power at least cosmetically'.

Zia obviously saw what lay ahead for Sri Lanka. I remember an interview he granted me in Islamabad where my poser as to what a small country like Sri Lanka should do when India was such a forceful neighbor received the reply. 'Cultivate your friendship with China'. The news was carried with banner headlines in Sri Lanka and India.

A weakness of the book is that the media has been virtually ignored. A few extracts from newspapers on both sides of the Palk Straits would have helped to give readers the mood at the time. He has only chosen to print 3 cartoons from India, complimentary of himself. At least one Wijesoma, Opatha or Yunus would have helped spice up the book.

' Mr Dixit says that at the end of 1985 he conveyed to the Government of India that the Government and the Sri Lanka power structure were not genuinely interested in an amicable and practical solution to the ethnic dispute. Similarly the Sri Lanka Government's opposition to the merger of the North and East was also not palatable to Dixit. But the events which followed were at marked contrast to the reaction British foreign secretary Robin Cook recently had when he spoke about foreign assistance to settle the Kashmir dispute. No thank you, sir, that's an internal problem but little Sri Lanka? They needed our assistance and we gave it to them, whether they liked it or not.

JR comes out in a new light in the book. He was perceived to be one who quietly acquiesced to the demands of India. But the pressures the man was put under are revealed in detail. Even until the last he resisted the accord but it was too late. He learnt to his cost that when the issue was annoying India, neither USA nor any western power or even Israel was willing to take a risk. His friends used him but the reality of the situation was much stronger. Similarly, India's phobias are strongly evident. The friendship with USA, Israel, Pakistan were seen through jaundiced eyes. JR either did not understand or chose to ignore the fact that every time he paraded his friends in public, it was tantamount to waving a red rag at a bull.

A visit by a team of Pakistani Space and Telecommunications specialists was seen

as an attempt to give certain facilities to Pakistan who could use it to eavesdrop on LTTE conversations. But Dixit's fear was that they would also provide information on India's southern and eastern naval and air commands to Pakistan.

Dixit spent more hours with JR than any other foreign diplomat and knew him well. JR had a puckish sense of humor which was shown only to a few close friends. The one I like best is when JR queried why Indian ministers of State Chidambaram and Natwar Singh who had come to see him in Colombo in 1985 were so serious and earnest and do not smile. Dixit replied that JR should think why these ministers who were half his age were affected by so much solemnity. JR then told Dixit a story about the Bishop of Chichester.

The Bishop, who had hedonistic inclinations, was walking down the stair- case of an elegant bordello in London in the early 19th century when he encountered his son coming up the same stair- case. The son was shocked to see his father in such a place and asked, "How 'can you, a man of the cloth, come to such a place of sin? The Bishop replied, 'I prefer the athletic enthusiasm of the ladies upstairs to the very reluctant compliance of your mother at home. JR then said, 'Now perhaps you understand the difference in the mindset of young people like Natwar Singh and Chidambaram on the one hand and mine on the other".

Dixit not only negotiated with JR but also with LTTE leader Prabhakaran. The LTTE supremo's one track mind is revealed in an incident when the Tamil Nadu Government once captured all the communication equipment. Prabhakaran went on a fast demanding the return of the equipment which was finally agreed to by chief minister M.G.Ramachandran. Prabhakaran was asked what his main concern was when he was fasting. He replied that his main worry was that his trigger finger would become weak due to lack of nutrition affecting his shooting capacities!

Dixit's book reveals how Sri Lanka had a mole inside the Indian intelligence agency, Unnikrishnan, from whom in- formation was leaked through a foreign lady working for Pan American Airways.

India's threats prevented Lalith Athulathmudali's plans for Operation Liberation which meant the takeover of the Jaffna peninsula. But Dixit admits that Operation Liberation would have succeeded but for India's decisive intervention in June 1987 to safeguard Tamil interests and keeping in mind the requirements or preserving the unity and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka. Dixit told Lalith that the military operations will not be allowed to succeed. Lalith asked 'who will not allow it to

succeed, India or LTTE? Dixit advised him to ponder dispassionately.

JR's orders to his military commanders were to raze Jaffna to the ground burn the town and then rebuild it. He told Dixit this time the fight is to the finish'. Rajiv's reaction was to state publicly that India would intervene to safe-guard the welfare of the Tamils. Dixit says that when the statement was brought to the notice of JR, he was acerbic in his comments saying, 'India can go to hell. The rest is history.

The famous 'parippu drop' of the Indian aircraft accompanied by Mirage fighters is well known. But what is revealed in the book for the first time is why Sri Lanka did not lift a finger to stop it. Dixit told foreign minister Hameed that if there was any retaliatory action the Indian fighter aircraft had necessary clearance to take retaliatory action against Sri Lankan Air Force, air bases and ground forces. Dixit says he is not sure whether it was Premadasa or Malemarichi(Sic) who said of the air drop on radio, Pariah dogs come often uninvited to our backyard. They shit and run away".

He gives in detail the events leading up to the signing of the Indo Lanka Accord and the aftermath and confirms that India was asked for about Rs 50 million for the LTTE as Prabhakaran said he was going to surrender arms and needed to look after his cadres until they were absorbed into the administration and police force. India coughed up. Prabhakaran, mastermind, will go down in history as one who got assistance from a President of Sri Lanka and a Prime Minister of India.

An interesting revelation is that JR feared there may be a coup by Lalith and Premadasa with the Sri Lanka Armed Forces and asked Dixit for help. This led Rajiv to send Indian Navy ships with commandos who would whisk JR away if the situation became serious. These were the ships that were anchored off Galle Face soon after the Accord was signed.

He reveals how RAW(India's equivalent of CIA) and the IPKF were doing different functions with RAW often taking a contrary stand. But Rajiv Gandhi was aware of this. He says Rajiv followed a two track policy continuing military operations while trying to re-



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main in touch with the LTTE through Indian intelligence agencies.

The massacre of the Indian para- troopers when they tried to take command of the LTTE base at the University of Jaffna was made possible because the IPKF forgot to change the frequency of their transmitters which had earlier been used to communicate with the LTTE. Thus the LTTE knew their plans 4 hours in advance and Prabhakaran made his escape.

Dixit takes JR to task saying he let a soluble ethnic problem drift into a civil war phenomenon resulting in external intervention in the domestic affairs of his country."

He does not spare Premadasa and says that Premadasa encouraged the JVP to heighten the levels of tension and violence in the Sinhalese areas of the country targeting the Indo Lanka agreement and the IPKF. But he does not spotlight Premadasa's major blunder in sending the Israelis packing soon after saying good-bye to the IPKF. The attempt to please India had no impact and today ironically India has diplomatic relations with Israel while Sri Lanka does not.

Lalith was a combination of Machiavelli and Bismark. He says Prabhakaran surviving the IPKF operations was more due to the political contradictions affecting Indian and Sri Lankan policies than his personal capacities. But Prabhakaran must be given full credit for outwitting both Rajiv Gandhi and Premadasa. Dixit says that instead of being sent, if the IPKF had been allowed to continue Sri Lanka would not have undergone the sufferings which it has gone through since 1990.

In his mea culpa at the end of the book, Dixit admits that while Mrs Gandhi's support for Sri Lankan Tamil aspirations were correct and justified, her policy of materially supporting Tamil militant separatists was wrong. He adds, 'India's interests and the Tamil cause which oriented her towards generating pressure on Jayewardene could have been pursued by political and diplomatic means instead of extending material support to Tamil militants.

The book is timely as it has been released at a time when the Jain Commission report on the Rajiv Gandhi assassination has made its appearance. Though there is a certain amount of repetition, which could have been eliminated with tight editing, Dixit's book is an important contribution to understand what happened in the eighties and where Sri Lanka and India made blunders, which led to suffering in both countries. Sri Lanka continues to bleed even today. The book is being translated into Sinhala too.

Dixit says in the introduction that he asked P.N.Haskar, his guru in politics and diplomacy and former principal secretary to Mrs Gandhi whether the Sri Lanka experience was a tragedy. Mr Haskar said, 'Mani, you must have read all the Shakespearean tragedies. Have you ever given thought as to why in each of these tragedies there was one individual who was the focal impulse to all the tragic developments, whether it was Richard III, King Lear, Macbeth, Othello or Hamlet'.

He says it will take a long time for him to decide whether Mrs Gandhi, Jayewardene, Premadasa or Rajiv Gandhi can be perceived in this Shakespearean mold. He forgot one important character in this list. His name is J.N.Dixit.