

India-Sri Lanka Relations

—By Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur, VSM (Retd.)

Discussing a situation or a problem in a group is always more beneficial, as it generates more information and ideas which help in resolving issues. It has also been experienced, that sharing a complex problem with other members of a group also reduces stress and anxiety. Owing to these reasons, group discussions are regularly conducted in a social, corporate and bureaucratic set-up at various levels of the organisation to sort out issues and gain information. Apart from this, group discussions are also very effectively used as a significant tool to assess various personality traits of an individual. Presently, various organisations are using group discussion as a selection technique for selecting candidates for entry-level jobs, as well as screening candidates for admissions in top level educational institutions. Group Discussion or GD is one of the main rounds of admission process that can make or mar a candidate's chances of getting selected in the institute of his/her choice. Presently, some IIMs, top MBA colleges and other prestigious institutions in India conduct group discussions to screen candidates for their admissions. Group Discussion is now a proven technique to assess the suitability of an individual for managerial or administrative jobs. During the process of selection of Defence Services Officers also, group discussions are being conducted. This is so, as during group discussions, a candidate's knowledge, listening skills, communication skills, leadership qualities, behaviour in a group, self-confidence and ability to work under stress, etc. are clearly visible to assessors. These qualities are considered necessary for an individual to succeed as a manager or an administrator.

To screen candidates for admissions in a top management institute of India, a group of 10 candidates were called to participate in a GD session. The candidates arrived appropriately dressed for this formal interaction and were made to sit in a semi-circle. This was done to ensure that all the three assessors could easily observe the candidates and clearly listen to them as well. Thereafter, candidates were allotted Identification Numbers, which were pinned on their shirts and could be seen from a distance. Candidates were



Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur is a senior selector and trainer. He has worked as a selector at two Services Selection Boards and Chief Instructor at Defence Institute of Psychological Research, New Delhi. He has conducted a large number of interviews and group discussions during the last 2 decades and has authored four books, including two books on Interviews and Group Discussions. He has received Vishisht Seva Medal awarded by the President of India and Commendation by the Chief of the Air Staff.

specifically asked to address each other by these Identification Numbers and NOT by their names. Subsequently, a detailed briefing was given to inform all Dos and Don'ts, which were to be kept in mind during this session of GD. In particular, candidates were told that they were at liberty to speak as much as they wanted and could speak as many times as they wished, but they must ensure that all candidates were provided an opportunity to express their ideas on the selected topic. Further, they were told to maintain discipline while they spoke, which implied that only one person should speak at a time. Once the briefing got over, candidates were given three topics and were asked to choose any one for today's group discussion after mutual consultation. The above topic was chosen by this group for GD. Candidates were asked to conclude the discussion in 20-25 minutes. Thereafter, candidates were given 5-minute time to prepare the topic before the discussion could be started.

Subsequently, the group discussion started in the following manner:

Candidate No. 9 : Good morning friends. I am sure you are all quite keen to express your views on this much talked about current topic. Both India and Sri Lanka are republics within the Commonwealth of Nations. India and Sri Lanka share a maritime border and

both nations occupy a strategic position in South Asia. We are aware that India has very old relations with Sri Lanka and these relations have gone through some good and some not-so good times in the previous years. Unfortunately, for some time in the recent past, Sri Lanka is facing an unprecedented financial crisis, which has also led to terrible unrest in Sri Lanka. During this period of uncertainty, Sri Lanka's close relations with India have once again come into focus. We are needed to discuss in detail as to how India's relations with Sri Lanka have been shaping up during all these years, and how various developments in this regard have influenced lives of people of the two countries.

Candidate No. 2 : I think No. 9 has introduced the topic quite well. We may start sharing our views now.

Candidate No. 8 : Friends, I feel, to deal with this topic in a comprehensive manner and to put things in perspective, we need to discuss various developments with respect to our relations with Sri Lanka in a chronological manner. This would make us easily understand and appreciate this topic comprehensively. I hope all of you would agree with me on this approach to deal with this topic.

Candidate No. 1 : Yes, I also think it is a good idea. I totally agree with you to adopt this approach.

Candidate No. 6 : If I am not mistaken, India-Sri Lanka relations are so old that they go long back to the recorded history of our subcontinent. They are built upon strong foundations of a shared culture and socio-economic heritage and huge people-to-people contacts over a very long period. I think the earliest mention of Sri Lanka could be observed in the Ramayana. The king of Lanka, Ravana, who kidnapped and kept Sita captive in Lanka and was subsequently rescued by Lord Ram with the assistance of Hanuman after fighting a war. Further, India-Sri Lanka relations also go back to the emergence of Buddhism, some 2000 years ago. During this period, Buddhism was spread in Sri Lanka by Gautam Buddha and King Ashoka. Later, north and north-east areas of Lanka witnessed considerable trade and economic activities with India.

Candidate No. 3 : I would like to add that even though Sri Lanka was

colonially under the British, yet they were not part of the British-India empire and were administered separately. Subsequently, British started getting labour from India, mainly from Tamil Nadu, who started settling down in northern parts of Sri Lanka and their number also increased as the time passed.

Candidate No. 10 : This historical part is quite right, but did this situation change after India and Sri Lanka became independent countries in later years?

Candidate No. 9 : As we know, Sri Lanka became independent one year after India i.e., in 1948, and during later years, Tamils were discriminated by the Sinhalese government. The government made it difficult for Tamils to become citizens of Sri Lanka. This did adversely impact India-Sri Lanka relations. However, consequent to a pact between Indian and Sri Lankan governments in 1964, three lakh Tamils were given citizenship and quite a few were repatriated. But, things changed after 1971 Indo-Pak war, when India came closer to USSR, while Sri Lanka became friendly with the US and the West.

Candidate No. 7 : I think No. 9 has really explained post-independence scenario quite well.

Candidate No. 6 : Yes, I would like to add that the situation did undergo a change after Tamil riots took place in Sri Lanka after 1977. It is alleged that India did support Tamil rebels during this period, but India did not support establishing a separate state of Tamils also. Meanwhile, I must mention the formation of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1976, which became a powerful force and started asserting itself in a big way in subsequent years. Therefore, Sri Lankan government took help from Pakistan and China to prepare its army to tackle LTTE. After the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord (ISLA) in 1987, India also intervened to fight LTTE by deploying Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), during the period from 1987 to 1990 with the intention of finishing the Sri Lankan Civil War.

Candidate No. 1 : But, was the mission of IPKF successful or not?

Candidate No. 3 : No, LTTE outrightly rejected the ISLA, did not give up arms to IPKF as planned, and also killed the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Thereafter, India did not intervene in Sri Lankan affairs. After India opened its economy in 1991, both India and Sri Lanka took steps to improve relations, especially when Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe were heading governments in Sri Lanka. Later in 1998, India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement was also signed.

Candidate No. 4 : I think No. 3 has covered this development quite adequately.

Candidate No. 5 : Can some friend now tell us the subsequent developments in India-Sri Lanka relations?

Candidate No. 3 : Yes, I would like to inform that after Mahinda Rajapaksa became President in 2005, Sri Lanka launched the Eelam war against the LTTE from 2006 to 2009, in which Prabhakaran, the most prominent leader of LTTE, was killed and LTTE also wiped out. In this action, quite a few civilians were also killed. But, during this war, Sri Lanka came closer to China and Pakistan. At this time, China not only provided arms to Sri Lanka, but gave huge economic aid as well. Causing much anxiety in India, Sri Lanka also gave access of Hambantota Port to China. Owing to which, India feared a civil-military nexus in Sri Lanka and it rang alarm bells for India. India had to ensure that China and Pakistan did not use Sri Lanka against India. These developments did cause a dent in the then existing cordial relations between India and Sri Lanka.

Candidate No. 8 : I think we have quite adequately covered some significant historical aspects of India-Sri Lanka relations. We need to now talk about how Sri Lanka is strategically important for India? Do you agree with me?

Candidate No. 10 : Very right. Can some friend talk about this specific aspect of India-Sri Lanka relations?

Candidate No. 9 : Yes, Sri Lanka is located at the southern tip of peninsular India and is extremely significant for India with regard to its security and other issues strategically. We need to bear in mind that Sri Lanka is located near the major sea lanes of communication from Europe to East Asia and the oil tanker route from the oil producing nations of the Gulf to Japan, China and other Pacific nations. From the security angle, this route is also utilised by countries to move naval power from the Pacific Ocean to Indian Ocean and the Gulf. Indian Navy operates close to Sri Lanka for its frequent moves in Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea. So, an unfriendly Sri Lanka would certainly pose problems for India in many ways.

Candidate No. 6 : Not only these issues, India has to also bear in mind that China has been making huge investments through its Belt and Road Initiative and utilises Hambantota and Colombo Ports in Sri Lanka. China is also an important trading partner of Sri Lanka. India's not-so-good relations with Sri Lanka would be advantageous for China and it could use Sri Lanka to

strategically encircle India. This may pose serious security issues for India, which can't be overlooked at any time.

Candidate No. 1 : Good, I think we have talked about strategic aspects of India-Sri Lanka relations and should now talk about business and trade relations. Am I right?

Candidate No. 3 : Yes, the two countries are close in economic terms with India being Sri Lanka's one of the largest trading partners. India and Sri Lanka are member nations of several regional and multilateral organisations like SAARC, South Asian Economic Union and BIMSTEC, etc., and both nations are signatories to the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). Consequent to free trade agreement signed in 2000, strong commercial and trade relations have been growing over the years between the two nations. Major exports of India to Sri Lanka account for about 66% of the total exports to Sri Lanka.

Candidate No. 9 : If I recall correctly, top exports from India include mineral fuels, petroleum oil, vehicles, coal, railway equipment, knitted fabric, cotton and steel, etc. while Sri Lanka exports animal food, refined petroleum, nuts, etc. to India. In fact, during the last 25 years, exports of Sri Lanka to India have increased at an annualised rate of about 14% from 1995 to 2020.

Candidate No. 10 : Yes, we can see that over the years, commercial and trade relations between India and Sri Lanka have grown substantially.

Candidate No. 6 : Not only this, India is also one of the largest contributors of FDI in Sri Lanka and quite a few well-known Indian companies have invested in Sri Lanka and are doing good business there. Indian investments in Sri Lanka are mainly in the areas of tourism and hotel, petroleum retail, manufacturing of various products, real estate, banking and financial services, etc. Similarly, eyeing on the huge Indian market, a number of Sri Lankan companies have also invested in India.

Candidate No. 8 : We have now adequately discussed trade and commercial relations between the two countries. I think India has also taken an active part in various developmental activities of Sri Lanka and we must highlight this important aspect also. Can some friend talk about it now?

Candidate No. 3 : Yes, if I recall correctly, approximately one-sixth of the total development credit granted by India is made available to Sri Lanka. India's overall commitment stands close to \$3 billion, out of which approximately \$560 million are purely

in grants. In this regard, Indian Housing Project to initially build 50,000 houses for the war-affected people and estate workers in the plantation areas, is India's flagship project.

Candidate No. 9 : I would like to add that in the field of security also, India and Sri Lanka have been cooperating and a large number of Sri Lankan military personnel have been trained by India. Joint military training exercises have also been conducted and India has also exported military hardware to Sri Lanka. In addition, regular maritime exercises between Indian Navy and Sri Lankan Navy are being conducted.

Candidate Number 1 : Friends, I think we have so far discussed only positive aspects of India-Sri Lanka relations, I am sure there are many challenges faced by this relationship in the past also. We should also talk about these challenges now.

Candidate No. 2 : Yes, quite right. Can some of us talk about these challenges now?

Candidate No. 9 : One of the oldest issue pertains to the fishermen of both countries. There have been numerous instances of fishermen of both countries entering into each other's territorial waters besides Indian fishermen using mechanised boats. Sri Lankan fishermen allege that use of these mechanised boats hampers their fishing business. However, both countries have agreed to refrain from taking drastic actions against fishermen for entering into each other's territorial waters. Another major problem has been the ethnic issue. This pertains to the old conflict between the Sinhala majority and Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. This issue has also led to war-crimes and so many other problems.

Candidate No. 6 : I think another major challenge in India-Sri Lanka relations has been the China factor. Sri Lanka has agreed to join China's flagship connectivity project Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which India opposes. Sri Lanka is also an important part of China's maritime strategy, which is a major security issue for India in view of continued Chinese threat on Indian borders. In this regard, when Sri Lanka leased the strategically crucial Hambantota Port to China, it became an important issue from India's security point of view and did adversely impact India-Sri Lanka relations. In fact, both India and China continuously make efforts to keep Sri Lanka under their influence. However, Sri Lanka did move closer to China, especially in terms of naval agreements and seeking financial assistance.

Candidate No. 7 : I think we have covered most challenges faced by India-Sri Lanka relations. Am I right?

Candidate No. 3 : No, I would like to add that India-Sri Lanka relations were also tested by the Sri Lankan Civil War, when Indian intervention became controversial. Indian intervention by sending Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) became inevitable as the Civil War threatened India's unity, national interest and territorial integrity. During this action, India had supported Sri Lankan government's actions against terror activities of the LTTE, but also asked for a peaceful solution and rehabilitation of Tamils, who had suffered.

Candidate No. 10 : But, I think in the recent years, political relations between the two countries have improved due to high-level exchanges of visits at regular intervals. During the Covid-19 pandemic, India did help Sri Lanka by dispatching vaccines and in the current economic crisis also, India has widened its footprint in Sri Lanka by offering considerable support.

Candidate No. 9 : During the current economic collapse in Sri Lanka, India has extended lines of credit totalling \$4 billion for food, fuel, fertiliser and medicines. India has already given \$5 billion to Sri Lanka as development assistance with more than \$600 million as grants. Out of the \$26 billion repayment on which Sri Lanka defaulted this year, China is owed \$7 billion. Therefore, Sri Lanka is currently not appreciating China's conditions of economic help and has turned to India, the West and the IMF for support. For India, a diminished Chinese role is welcome, as this will improve relations between India and Sri Lanka.

Candidate No. 4 : Friends, time allotted to us for this group discussion is getting over and we need to conclude it now.

Candidate Number 5 : May I request No. 6 to conclude this discussion, if you all agree?

Candidate No. 6 : Well friends, we all had a very detailed and fruitful discussion on this currently widely discussed topic. We have discussed various aspects of good relations as well as challenges faced by India-Sri Lanka ties. As we know, presently Sri Lanka is facing worst economic as well as political crises, which led to a breakdown in law and order. Extremely high inflation, partly caused by economic mismanagement, and adverse impact of Covid pandemic and Ukraine war, have

brought Sri Lanka to the edge of bankruptcy. There is shortage of food, fuel, medicines and other essential commodities. Sri Lanka is seeking economic aid from IMF and other agencies and India has extended a helping hand to Sri Lanka during this crisis. Recently, both the President and the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka have been replaced. After the change of regime in Sri Lanka, it is hoped that friendly relations between the two countries would be further strengthened. Finally, all said and done, India and Sri Lanka, being close neighbours, need each other and friendly relations between the two countries are also in the interest of people of both the countries.

Thank you friends and you all have a good day.

Critical Analysis of Candidates' Performance : Good : 3, 6 and 9

Watching this GD, it is apparent that these candidates have come adequately prepared to participate in this interaction. They have also put forward data and information to support their points of view and other candidates have not disputed the facts presented by them. Moreover, these candidates are the main speakers and have made major contribution during this GD. They spoke with sufficient self-confidence also. Owing to all these reasons, their performance has been assessed as 'Good'.

Average : 1, 8 and 10

These candidates have taken part in the group discussion, but sporadically. They did express their ideas to take the GD further, but their contribution remained somewhat limited. It became apparent that they did have some knowledge about the topic, but had not prepared adequately to participate in this interaction. Had they made more efforts to prepare in a comprehensive manner, they could have easily performed much better. They did not have much information or data to support their points of view. Due to these reasons, their performance has been assessed as 'Average'.

Below Average : 2, 4, 5 and 7

These candidates have barely taken part in the group discussion. In fact, they have been either appreciating other candidates or asking other candidates to speak. Their own contribution towards progression of this group discussion has been quite inadequate. It goes to show that they did not care to prepare the topic before coming to participate in this GD. Due to lack of preparation, they did not have adequate self-confidence also to express their views. They should have realised that prior to taking part in a competitive GD, it is most essential to gain sufficient awareness about the topic. Owing to all these reasons, their performance has been accordingly assessed as 'Below Average'.

CSR