



**Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies**  
1/46, Old Elephant Road, Eskaton, Dhaka-1000

Lecture on

**EQUITY, OPPORTUNITY AND EMPOWERMENT: A SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Organised by BIISS on 06 August 2012

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**SUMMARY OF THE PROCEEDINGS**

**1. Introduction**

The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) and Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) jointly organised a Lecture on “**Equity, Opportunity and Empowerment: A South Asian Perspective**” at the BIISS Auditorium on Monday, 06 August 2012. **Major General Muhammad Imrul Quayes**, ndc, psc, Director General of BIISS and **Ambassador Farooq Sobhan**, President of BEI, delivered the Addresses of Welcome. **Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi**, Adviser on International Affairs to Hon’ble Prime Minister graced the occasion as Chief Guest and delivered the Concluding Remarks. The key note lecturer of the session was **H. E. Professor G. L. Peiris**, Hon’ble Minister of External Affairs of Sri Lanka.

Following the lecture, a lively floor discussion session took place where distinguished scholars, members of the academia, representatives of multi-disciplinary professional bodies, representatives from the foreign missions, government and non-government agencies and policy makers actively participated, raised questions and gave their valuable comments, suggestions and recommendations.

**2. Addresses of Welcome**

**Major General Muhammad Imrul Quayes**, ndc, psc in his Address of Welcome remarked that both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have been historically tied by the British and the formal diplomatic relation between the two countries was established in 1972. Bilateral relations between the two states are very friendly and cooperation is consolidated through the highest level visits of scholars and eminent persons in the past. He informed that Bangladesh is the 4<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner of Sri Lanka in the SAARC region. Bangladeshi Jute products and Sri Lankan coconut, tea and rubber have a very good prospect in the years to come. In addition, Sri Lankan current investment in Bangladesh is in banking and garment sector and it is expected to diversify into different areas. Currently, more than 700 Sri Lankan students having different discipline study in Bangladesh and it is on the increase. Games and sports contributed a lot bringing the people together. In 2007, Bangladesh government donated dissected Lord Buddah which is a milestone of improving bilateral relations between the two countries. Both the countries are the

members of Commonwealth, NAM, SAARC and Indian RIM Association. Besides, both the countries have some commonalities and similarities in terms of food habits, ethics, culture, landscape and ocean to share.

**Ambassador Farooq Sobhan** stated that the subject that Professor G.L Peiris has chosen will highlight some of his ideas and insight on the way forward for South Asia. The South Asian countries have been facing a number of challenges but the fact is that the region is being a successful one in terms of economic growth. Despite that, much of the people of this region live below the poverty line and half of the population still live with a dollar and half a day. Another problem is the growing disparity as region grows. Therefore, it is indeed a challenge how to address the problem of equity, empowerment and opportunity. Opportunity means not only ensuring education at the primary or secondary level, what opportunity people can avail is important. Access to education for all is a major challenge for the country. In terms of democracy, Ambassador Sobhan remarked that Bangladesh is practicing democracy but need to ensure good governance and proper participation in democratic process in an inclusive society. He said that the subject of empowering women who constitute 50 per cent of the total population is equally important and they should give equal share in the society. He felt that it is important to build inclusive society giving the chance of adequate representation of ethnic groups. Finally, he commented that almost all the South Asian countries are grappling these problems and therefore, the subject is very pertinent to overcome these challenges.

### **3. Lecture**

Professor G.L Peiris said that the subject of equity, opportunity and empowerment is very important in the evolving world. Citing the example of Bangladesh, he remarked that in the last session of the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also raised this issue. In case of Sri Lanka, he stressed on the point that the transition of violence has been going on for the last 3 decades. But, Sri Lanka is basically a peaceful country and currently its growth is nearly 8 per cent. He viewed that the concept of equity, opportunity and empowerment can be applied in Sri Lanka. He explained that in May 2009, while the hostility going on, Sri Lankan government thought that priority should be given to the Northern Province of the country. During the last 6 months, the improvement of school and colleges and the thriving economy of this region are noticeable. For the revival of agriculture, a number of initiatives have been taken and as a consequence of that, the current growth of that region is 22 per cent which was only 8 per cent before. This is, however, a deliberate decision of the Sri Lankan government. Apart from economic and agricultural issues, access to opportunity is a matter that is dealt in Sri Lanka. The government believes that it is not necessary to move people from village to urban areas for overall development. Rather, central objective is to lead their lives fruitfully. Therefore, the government has concentrated on the rural areas for the development in their own environment.

Professor G.L Peiris informed that similar approach is taken with regard to the recruitment of public service commission. As an initiative, competent teachers used to go in the remote rural areas and teach the people. It is one kind of self perpetuating system in order to get an equitable result and uplift the condition of the people who live in those areas. Besides, to be fair and just and to be balanced, some other mature action is taken. One of the initiatives is quota system for women or disadvantaged group for the fair representation in the Parliament. Sri Lankan government feels that there is no problem with regard to access to education for women but the only area where the insufficient number of women is seen, is in politics. Women, however, are not interested to come in politics due to the fear of decaying the dignity. Therefore, Sri Lankan

government compels the political parties to keep a certain number of women candidates during nomination. The government also declares to incorporate the youth candidates aged less than 30, otherwise, nomination will not be accepted.

Professor G.L Peiris feels that inclusion of the aspiration of the people is very important apart from social and economic aspects. Over the period, Sri Lanka is grappling with the constitutional reform due to lack of consensus while implementing the programmes, lack of bottom up approach and absence of genuine political institutions. It is noted that Sri Lanka is a country which had election since 1931, almost 17 years ago of getting independence. For political modalities, the country tries to ensure best political representation. From 31-78 years, Sri Lanka had conventional system and from 1978 to present day, the country practices proportional system in the Parliament. He viewed that Parliament is a mirror of public opinion in Sri Lanka. In 1977 the present ruling party, (Sri Lankan Freedom Party), obtained 32 per cent of votes which encompassed almost one third of national votes. The lack of nexus between the elected person and the constituent and absence of bi-election system (if somebody dies or resigns) reduce the popularity of the current political government. Now, the government is thinking about the concept of hybrid system in which fundamental area is to concentrate exclusively on the Parliament. As a step, Sri Lanka introduces local government system like the *Panchayet* of India to incorporate the people vigorously in decision making process.

Professor G.L Peiris said that like other countries, Sri Lanka faces terrorist activities, and hence, the government is trying to address its root causes. One of the challenges is the presence of diasporas whose attitudes are totally different than that of the Tamil people. He added that, in Sri Lanka, there is no hostility among the community at the grass root level and the Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists are the part of one family. Nevertheless, one of the major problems is language barrier. He informed that few months ago, Sri Lankan government inaugurated triangular capability initiative. The major objective of this venture is to introduce cross pollination by taking linguistic and cultural initiatives. Also, public officers, who are bi-lingual, can serve this area to forge the relation with the people and reduce the tension in the society.

#### 4. Open Discussion

Sri Lankan High Commissioner **Ambassador Doula** said that in 2002, there was an attack in Jaffna on the diplomats and it was ended through a ceasefire. During the conflicts, the Tamils are complaining discrimination and the Muslims in the North are totally displaced. He wanted to know what happened to them and whether they had gone back to that place. He also queried how Sri Lanka ended the war addressing the development issues in the North.

**Dr. Syed Anwar Husain, Editor, *The Daily Sun***, commented that LTTE is essentially a group of having lack of equity, opportunity and empowerment. He wanted to know how far they are been graduated after the armed conflict.

Citing the example of Aristotle, Former Ambassador **Ashraf ud Doula** remarked that “the unequal are equal” is not a justice and it has a deep thought. The reason is that, one size cannot fit for others. He added that, like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh is facing a number of problems. He enquired whether the strategy that Sri Lanka adopted in the Northern region would fit in Bangladesh or any other countries in South Asia.

In reply, **Professor G. L. Peiris** remarked that every country holds certain values, history, culture tradition and social norms. Thus, some of the strategies of Sri Lanka cannot be applied in a different culture. Moreover, without modification, it is difficult to imply in different settings.

According to him, Sri Lankan government are very much aware of displaced people. The problems of Muslims in the North are not serious but it is acute in the East. During the talk between the Tamil and the government, Muslims generally become the part of discussion. The government considers fair strategy to all the groups who are displaced.

**Mustafizur Rahman**, Chairman, Institute of Development Strategy, talked about constitution which he feels is the basic of participatory democracy. He commented that without having a fair constitution, people cannot achieve what they wanted to achieve. Sri Lanka has this trend and therefore, they have now found a solution. The case of Bangladesh is different as it has Article 70 in which an elected MP cannot represent his constituency. Therefore, the democracy of the country is not fully representative in Bangladesh. In addition, the quota system favours the particular political party and it is a negative aspect for participatory democracy.

**One of the participants** has said that democracy in Sri Lanka is a very mature democracy. Perhaps, Sri Lanka is the first country in South Asia which changed its governments through election. Sri Lankan government should try to work with a compromise or reasonable formula to minimise the problem.

On this, **Professor G. L. Peiris** commented that polarisation in Sri Lanka is unfortunately a negative culture and the country is trying to come out from this. He referred one Canadian scholar who lamented that Sri Lankan government is responsible for Sinhala and Tamil problems. He said that politics is a requirement of a party system. But, the politician must be realised that business cannot be applied in politics.

According to **Jamil Majid**, Former Principal, Foreign Service Academy, it is encouraging that the growth rate of Sri Lanka is 22 per cent which was 8 per cent before. Bangladesh is also doing better with 6 per cent growth rate. He said that language has become a barrier in Sri Lanka. However, Bangladesh has a common language and people are interested to learn a foreign language for better communication with the outside world. The country has also a religious language and it is a predicament that people are educating themselves through different forms of education system.

**Major General AMSA Amin (Rtd)** pointed out that political institutions are really genuine in Sri Lanka. He raised a question as to how political institutions in Sri Lanka are organised. Besides, the role of members in the Parliament is very positive. He then raised two points in this regard: How can it be compared with the Parliament members of Bangladesh? Does a Sri Lankan MP control the local government affairs in his area?

**Major General Aminullah Chowdhury**, Former Ambassador, raised particular question whether Thiruvankadam Velupillai Prabhakaran still has influence on Tamil population in Sri Lanka.

**Major General Muhammad Abdul Matin**, Former DG of BIISS wanted to know the Sri Lankan army's involvement in the development works including other social and cultural activities in Sri Lanka.

In his reply to the questions raised, **Professor G. L. Peiris** said that Sri Lanka has a common culture like Bangladesh. But Sri Lanka has population of 20 million which is equal to the population in Dhaka. So the problem of Bangladesh is more acute and complex. Thus, any kind of comparison between the two countries should not be fair. The Professor also informed the house that the Parliament members of Sri Lanka can determine their priority areas, different kinds of projects and run the project under direct supervision. **Professor G. L. Peiris** replied that Sri Lanka has an army by definition. Often they become an aggressive group. Despite that, they play a role to turn the situation from violence to stability in the country. Also, they are actively involved in different kinds of humanitarian activities and contributing in housing, green belt areas, construction of roads and preparing election.

#### **5. Concluding Remarks by the Chair**

**Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi**, in his concluding remarks pointed out that the word "quota" is been looked down upon and much of the definition of quota is ill conceived. He rephrased the term that "equality leads to inequality". Without a plain level field, quota does not work. In his view, "erosion of quota" and "stigma of quota" are hollow phrases and affirmative action should be taken to find out the best person. He stressed on the point that inequality must be introduced to ensure that there is a quality. A society should be merit based and there is no substitute of that for the overall enhancement of the society.