

Sri Lanka, or Ceylon as it was known previously, had expressed fears of domination by India and China way back in 1947, before it got independence from Britain.

In a paper published by the Nehru Memorial Museum Library in New Delhi, L C Jain says that Ceylon had raised the issue at the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi in March-April 1947, four months before India's independence and a year ahead of Ceylon's independence.

"A Ceylon delegate referred to the fear of small countries like Ceylon, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia etc., that they might be faced with aggression, not necessarily political, but economic and demographic, by their big brothers like China and India," Jain writes.

He was one of the assistant secretaries of the conference, organised by India's Interim Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and chaired by Sarojini Naidu. The conference put India on the international map, but it also gave a foretaste of the problems that it would face from fellow Asian countries.

"While it was true that India and China, as countries, were behind Ceylon in her freedom movement, the nationals of these countries residing in Ceylon did not want change because they were doing well under the colonial government. India and China were, of course, not to blame for this, but he (the Ceylonese delegate) wanted these countries to understand this position," Jain recalls.

Jain does not say if India responded to this fear. Perhaps India chose silence because, at that time, Ceylon and India were in the midst of a running battle over the status of over one million Indian plantation workers and traders in the island nation.

But China, which had no such issues, assured Colombo that Chinese immigrant communities would never seek political power. He further said that if, at any time, they posed a danger to any

host country, the Chinese government would devise ways and means of withdrawing the Chinese population from that country.

A Burmese delegate said that India had been a “tool” in the hands of British imperialism for subjugating countries around it like Burma, Ceylon and Malaya. Indonesia too had felt the pressure of Indian troops or the Indian economy. He hoped that “Brown exploitation” would not replace European capitalism and exploitation in Asia.

Nehru responded saying that the interim Indian government had withdrawn Indian troops from Indonesia and denied a Vietnamese delegate’s charge that ammunition was going from India to the French army battling freedom fighters in his country.

On top of it all, India and China clashed over Tibet. The Chinese delegation protested against the map of Asia put up behind the dais, which showed Tibet as an independent country.

“This is wrong. This must be corrected,” the Chinese told Sarojini Naidu immediately upon spotting it. But the map, specially done by artist Ernest Joseph, could not be modified till the end of the conference.

NEHRU CHIDED: Organiser and host Nehru tended to dominate the conference by his interjections. Fearing that this might be interpreted as Indian domination, Sarojini Naidu playfully tweaked his cheek and said: “Jawahar, you talk too much, let others talk now!”

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