



P.M. Modi's visits to Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Seychelles

The Prime Minister Narendra Modi in March 2015 gave a 5-day visit to three island nations of Indian Ocean -- Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka in an outreach that saw unveiling of developmental projects while boosting economic ties.

1. Significance of Modi's visits

- India has historical linkages with all the three countries and "very strong" people-to-people bonds.
- Modi's visit to these Island countries reflected our foreign policy priorities in India's immediate and extended neighbourhood. India attaches paramount importance to strengthening relations with this region, which is vital for India's security and progress.
- India has long been a pre-eminent maritime power in the Indian Ocean but for the past decade, its primacy has been increasingly challenged by China. Apart from the strategic requirement of maintaining its supremacy in the Indian Ocean Region, there are commercial reasons that dictate New Delhi's recalibration of Indian Ocean policy.
- As Modi said 90 percent of India's trade and oil imports moves by sea and as its economy becomes more globally integrated it would become more dependent on the ocean. So, the Indian ocean region is at the top of our policy priorities.

Modi was accompanied by National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar. The highlights of these visits are given below.

2. Visit to Seychelles

- Seychelles is a 115-island country located 1,500 km east of Southeast Africa. Seychelles was the first stopover of Modi's visit.
- He visited Seychelles from March 10 to March 11, 2015. Modi is the second Indian Prime Minister to visit Seychelles after Indira Gandhi's visit in 1981.
- Modi termed Seychelles as a "trusted friend and a strong strategic partner". Both the nations underlined the need for comprehensive cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region.
- India's bilateral cooperation with Seychelles is mainly in the field of health, education, defence and maritime security.
- The two nations signed four agreements for cooperation in hydrography, renewable energy, infrastructure development and hydro-graphic survey. Another important agreement is for infrastructure development in the Assumption Island.
- India will be leasing the Assumption Island, one of the 115 islands that constitute the Seychelles. On paper, the island will be leased for 'island development' for tourism purposes, but in actuality, it could be put to use as a listening and surveillance post.



- Modi also inaugurated the first of the eight Coastal Surveillance Radar Systems (CSRS) being set up by India. India is helping Indian Ocean littorals as part of capacity and capability enhancement in strengthening their maritime domain awareness capabilities.
- Modi also thanked Seychelles for supporting India in international fora, including endorsing India's permanent membership of an expanded UN Security Council.
- Seychelles had offered China its harbor for refueling and docking of Chinese warships stationed in the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy operations. India was apprehensive of China's intentions in Seychelles. Beijing tried to assuage Indian fears that it was not looking at Seychelles as a military base, but only as a pit stop for refueling purposes.
- India has traditionally been the main defense provider for Seychelles -- providing armaments and training to its Seychelles Peoples' Defense Forces. India recently gave a patrol ship to Seychelles. The patrol ship was for the Seychelles Coast Guard to better patrol its extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).
- In his meeting with President of Seychelles James Alix Michel, Mr. Modi announced that India will give a second Dornier aircraft to the Island nation for coastal surveillance.
- Other important announcements were to provide gratis visa for a period of three months and to include Seychelles in the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) Scheme.

3. Visit to Mauritius

- Modi said that his visit to Mauritius was aimed at strengthening India's age-old civilisational ties with 'Chhota Bharat'.
- Modi was the Chief Guest at the Independence Day celebrations in Mauritius on 12 March 2015, a date special to all Indians because Mahatma Gandhi began his Dandi March on the same date in 1930.
- He also held bilateral discussion with Mauritius President Rajkeswur Purryag and Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth.
- India offered \$500 million concessional line of credit to Mauritius for key infrastructure projects as the two nations signed five pacts, including an MoU in the field of 'ocean economy', which will provide an extensive framework for cooperation, a novel and critical area of sustainable development in the Indian Ocean Region.
- India and Mauritius signed an agreement to upgrade sea and air links on the remote Agalega islands, providing India a foothold in the middle of the Indian Ocean. India will assist in improving infrastructure for air and sea connectivity to the North and South Agalega islands.
- Other pacts signed are: MoU on cooperation in the field of traditional system of medicine and homoeopathy, programme for cultural cooperation between 2015-18 and a pact on import of fresh mango from India.
- Mauritius offered India cooperation on information exchange on taxation.
- Modi welcomed Mauritius' decision to make India its preferential partner in developing its security capabilities.
- India also agreed to technically waiving off the visa fee for Mauritius nationals in respect of the new visa on arrival system.
- Modi addressed a special session of the National Assembly of Mauritius. He jointly commissioned with Prime Minister Jugnauth the offshore patrol vessel Barracuda, which is the first custom built vessel exported by India.
- He unveiled a plaque with PM Jugnauth for the official commencement of construction of the building of the World Hindi Secretariat.
- During his talks with Modi, Mauritian Premier Jugnauth raised the issue related to Mauritius-India Double Taxation Avoidance Treaty (DTAA). The India-Mauritius Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) is being revised amid concerns that Mauritius is being used for round-tripping of funds into India.



4. Visit to Sri Lanka

While Sychelles and Mauritius are important in New Delhi's Indian Ocean diplomacy, Sri Lanka remains the pivot around which India's IOR policy revolves.

Modi's visit to Sri Lanka was the first standalone Prime Ministerial visit to Sri Lanka since the 1987 Rajiv Gandhi visit.

Since January, when Sri Lanka witnessed an unexpected change in government, India has made special efforts to re-engage with Colombo. The new regime in Sri Lanka, still somewhat on a shaky ground, has also seized the opportunity afforded by India's active outreach.

This visit was the second Summit in a month's time since the visit of President Maithripala Sirisena to India in the previous month. He was in India on his first foreign trip after assuming office.

Modi held talks with President Sirisena, former Presidents Kumaratunga and Rajapaksa. He also addressed the Sri Lankan Parliament and the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce.

Four agreements/ MOUs were signed during the visit: on customs cooperation; visa exemption for diplomatic and official passport holders; youth development; and construction of Rabindranath Tagore auditorium in Ruhuna University in Matara, Sri Lanka.

The highlight of Modi's two-day was his historic visit to the Northern Province. In Jaffna Modi called for an equitable development and respect for all citizens.

During his visit to Jaffna, the first by an Indian Prime Minister, Modi handed over certificates of Indian Housing Project to over 27,000 Tamils. The houses were built with Indian assistance as part of India's efforts to help in the reconciliation process.

He also unveiled the foundation stone of the Jaffna Cultural Centre to be built under a grant offered by India.

Modi flagged off a train service in the north-western town of Talaimannar, the closest point to India restored after decades of civil war, completing the reconstruction of the entire Northern Province Railway Line.

Other important outcomes are:

- inclusion of Sri Lanka in the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) Scheme
- announcement of a fresh line of credit for US\$318 million for Sri Lanka's railway sector
- extension of currency swap facility of US\$1.5 billion by Reserve Bank of India to Sri Lanka's Central Bank
- creating a Joint Task Force for cooperation in the Ocean Economy
- cooperation in development of a Ramayana Trail in Sri Lanka and the Buddhist circuit in India.

Another small but significant breakthrough came in the form of announcement that India will be developing the Oil tank Farm near Trincomalee in Eastern Sri Lanka. The China Bay Tank farm is the largest one located between West Asia and Singapore and serves as a major fuel supply hub for ships. For years, India wanted to run the facility jointly with Sri Lanka and retain a foothold in this crucial strategic facility but in 2013, Colombo had refused to sign an agreement in this regard.

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