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Katchatheevu Issue

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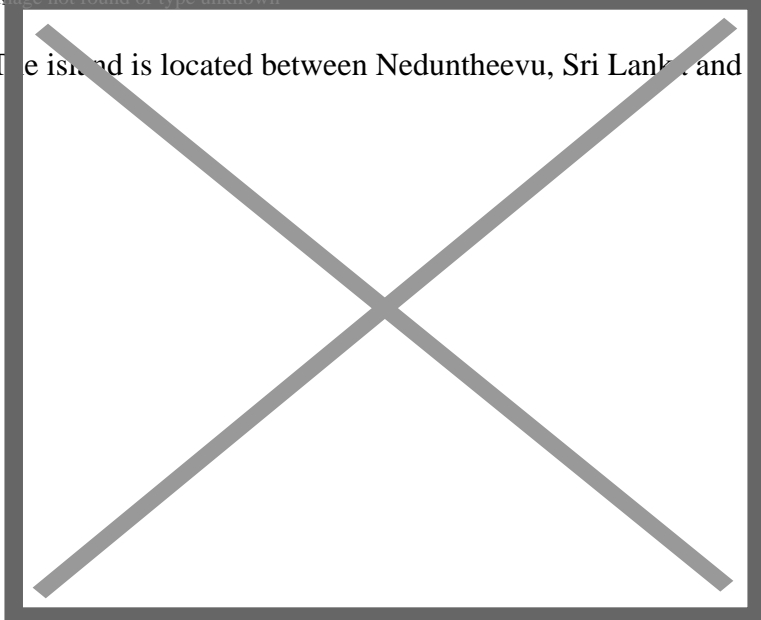
Why is in news? Katchatheevu and Wadge Bank: the story of two India-Sri Lanka agreements from a half century ago

Weeks before voting for the Lok Sabha election in Tamil Nadu, the BJP has reignited the decades-old Katchatheevu issue, accusing the Indira Gandhi government of “callously giving away”, as the Prime Minister said in a post on social media, the island to Sri Lanka.

About:

Katchatheevu is an **uninhabited off-shore island** in the Palk Strait.

The island is located between Neduntheevu, Sri Lanka, and Rameswaram, India.



It was formed **due to volcanic eruptions** in the **14th**

century.

The 285-acre land **was jointly administered** by India and Sri Lanka during British rule.

The **Raja of Ramnad** (present-day Ramanathapuram, Tamil Nadu) owned Katchatheevu island and later became part of the Madras Presidency.

In 1921, both Sri Lanka and India claimed this piece of land for fishing and the dispute remained unsettled.

After Indian independence, the country initiated to resolve the pre-independence territory dispute between Ceylon and the British.

Today, the **uninhabited island is administered by Sri Lanka.**

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Location of Wadge Bank with respect to Project site

The **120-year-old St Anthony’s Church** on the island attracts devotees from India and Sri Lanka for an **annual festival**.

When did Katchatheevu become a part of Sri Lanka?

In 1974, Indira Gandhi ceded the island of Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka in an attempt to **settle the maritime border issue** through the '**Indo-Sri Lankan Maritime Agreement**' and to demarcate the boundary between the two countries in the historic waters from Palk Strait to Adam’s Bridge.

It also pointed out that “this boundary falls one mile off the west coast of the uninhabited” Katchatheevu.

Indian fishermen retained limited access, but fishing rights were unclear.

Sri Lanka interpreted Indian fishermen’s right to access Katchatheevu to be limited to “rest, drying nets and for visit to the Catholic shrine without visa”.

How important is Katchatheevu?

Fisherfolk of the two countries have been traditionally using the islet for fishing.

Though this feature was acknowledged in the 1974 agreement, the supplemental pact in March 1976 made it clear that fishermen of the two countries “**shall not engage**” in fishing in the historic waters, territorial sea and exclusive zone or exclusive economic zone of either of the countries “**without the express permission of Sri Lanka or India.**”

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St. Anthony's Church there holds an annual festival, either in February or March, drawing devotees from both sides of the Palk Bay, a tradition which has been going on.

While **certain sections of political parties and fisherfolk in Tamil Nadu** believe that the retrieval of Katchatheevu would resolve the problem of fishermen having to illegally cross the International Maritime Boundary Line.

But the **fishermen of the Northern Province in Sri Lanka** say that this would only add to their suffering from the adverse impact of T.N. fishermen using the fishing method of bottom trawling on their territorial waters.

What triggered the negotiations between India and Sri Lanka?

Sri Lanka **claimed sovereignty** over Katchatheevu on the **ground that the Portuguese** who had occupied the island during 1505-1658 CE had exercised jurisdiction over the islet.

India's contention was that the erstwhile **Raja of Ramnad** [Ramanathapuram] had possession of it as part of his zamin.

How was the 1974 pact received?

The present demand for the Katchatheevu retrieval traces its origin to the opposition that the pact generated in 1974.

Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had contended that the decision to transfer the islet had been taken "behind the back" of the people and Parliament.

The then Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, in 1973 when the talk of the islet transfer had been doing rounds, had urged Indira Gandhi that the popular feeling was in favour of retaining Katchatheevu which belonged to India and not to Tamil Nadu alone.

When did the issue emerge again?

The Katchatheevu issue was revived in August 1991 with the then Chief Minister Jayalalithaa demanding retrieval during her Independence Day address.

She later modified her demand to one of getting the islet back through "a lease in perpetuity."

In the last 15 years, both Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi had approached the apex Court on the matter.

What happened after the 1974 and 1976 agreements?

The focus in the 1970s was on settling competing claims over territorial boundaries, which led to agreements that **gave Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka** and the **resource-rich Wadge Bank to India**.

In the 1990s, the **Palk Strait to the east of the Wadge Bank** saw a proliferation of efficient **bottom-trawl fishing** trawlers on the Indian side.

The Sri Lankan military was battling the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at the time, and its navy had no major presence in the sea region.

Indian fishing boats would **routinely enter Sri Lankan waters** for fishing during this time.

In 1991, when J Jayalalithaa was in her first term as Chief Minister, the Tamil Nadu Assembly sought the **retrieval of Katchatheevu and restoration of traditional fishing rights** for Indian Tamil fishermen. But the demand could not be followed up with Sri Lanka due to the civil war in that country.

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The situation changed after the war ended in 2009. Even as **Indian fishermen continued to enter Sri Lankan waters due to the depletion of marine resources on the Indian side**, the Sri Lankan navy began to carry out arrests, and destroyed hundreds of fishing boats for violating the maritime boundary.

This provoked a renewed wave of demands from political parties in Tamil Nadu, including the DMK and AIADMK, to retrieve Katchatheevu.

What has the Centre said?

In August 2013, the Union government told the Supreme Court that the question of retrieval of Kachchatheevu from Sri Lanka did not arise as **no territory belonging to India was ceded to Sri Lanka**.

It contended that the islet was **a matter of dispute between British India and Ceylon** (now Sri Lanka) and there was **no agreed boundary**, a matter of which was settled through 1974 and 1976 agreements.

In December 2022, the Centre, pointed out in its reply in the Rajya Sabha that **Katchatheevu “lies on the Sri Lankan side of the India-Sri Lanka International Maritime Boundary Line.”** It added that the matter was sub-judice in the Supreme Court.

Sri Lanka’s reaction to the demands from the Indian Tamil parties:

The two countries have **signed an international agreement on Katchatheevu** and **Sri Lanka has refused to link the status of the island with the Tamil fishermen’s issue**.

A Sri Lankan Cabinet Minister told that linking the two issues would be “inappropriate and inaccurate because the issue with regards to Indian fishermen is all about the bottom-trawlers they use for fishing outside Indian waters, which is illegal as per international maritime laws”.

“When this huge exploitation and depletion of maritime resources happen in the entire ocean region, the victims of these trawlers owned by Indian Tamil fishermen are not Muslims or Sinhala fishermen but the Sri Lankan Tamil fishermen,” the Sri Lankan Minister said.