

4. Katchatheevu – International Relations

The Katchatheevu island, ceded to Sri Lanka by India through agreements in 1974 and 1976, remains a persistent issue over sovereignty and fishing rights for Tamil Nadu fishermen. The conflict is driven by the use of destructive bottom trawling, ambiguity in past agreements, and its frequent exploitation for domestic political purposes.

Introduction

The long-standing dispute over Katchatheevu island's sovereignty and the associated fishing rights for Tamil Nadu fishermen has been reignited following a recent visit to the island by Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake.

About Katchatheevu Island

Location and Size – Katchatheevu is a 285-acre uninhabited island situated in the Palk Strait, between India and Sri Lanka, located northeast of Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu.

Geography and Features – The island was formed by a volcanic eruption in the 14th century. It lacks a source of drinking water, making it unsuitable for permanent human settlement.

Key Landmark – The only structure on the island is St. Anthony's Church, a Catholic shrine that hosts an annual festival attracting devotees from both India and Sri Lanka.

Historical Background

Early History – During the medieval period, the island was under the control of the Jaffna kingdom of Sri Lanka.

Colonial Era – Under British rule, both the Madras Presidency (India) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) laid claim to Katchatheevu. However, a clear maritime boundary was never formally defined, and Ceylon began administering the island in 1921.

Post-Independence Dispute – After gaining independence, both India (1947) and Sri Lanka (1948) continued to press their competing claims over the island.

1974 Agreement – This agreement was signed by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. It officially placed Katchatheevu on Sri Lanka's side of the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL). While sovereignty was ceded to Sri Lanka, Indian fishermen were allowed to access the island for resting, drying their nets, and attending the St. Anthony's festival without visas. Crucially, the agreement remained ambiguous on the issue of fishing rights.

1976 Agreement – This subsequent agreement gave India sovereign rights over the resource-rich Wadge Bank area. It explicitly prohibited fishing in each other's Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), effectively barring Indian fishermen from the waters surrounding Katchatheevu and creating the basis for the current conflict.

Key Issues in the Dispute

Ambiguity of Fishing Rights – The 1974 agreement's failure to clearly define fishing rights has allowed Sri Lanka to interpret the pact as restricting Indian fishermen to only non-fishing activities on the island.

Bottom Trawling – The use of bottom trawling by Indian fishermen is a major point of contention. This fishing method is considered highly destructive to marine ecosystems and is banned in Sri Lanka. It directly harms the livelihoods of Sri Lankan Tamil fishermen.

Political Exploitation – The issue is frequently used by politicians in Tamil Nadu for electoral gains, often framing the narrative around the past government "callously giving away" the island.

Legal Challenges – The Tamil Nadu government filed a petition in the Supreme Court in 2008 challenging the constitutionality of the 1974 and 1976 agreements. The challenge is based on the Berubari Union Case (1960), which held that ceding Indian territory requires a constitutional amendment. The matter remains sub judice (under judicial review).

Geopolitical Implications – Reopening the settled boundary dispute risks undermining India's "Neighborhood First" policy and its image as a rules-based international power, particularly at a time of China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean region.

The Way Forward – Potential Solutions

Ban Bottom Trawling - India must strictly enforce its commitment to phase out destructive bottom trawling and support the transition of fishermen to sustainable deep-sea fishing vessels.

Joint Management - A joint patrol system should be established to monitor the IMLB, prevent illegal fishing activities, and promote greater cooperation between the two nations' maritime forces.

Alternative Livelihoods - The government should invest in developing alternative income sources like aquaculture and tourism for the coastal communities in Tamil Nadu to reduce their dependence on fishing in the contested Palk Strait.

Diplomatic Dialogue - The Joint Working Group (JWG) should be strengthened to negotiate practical solutions, such as allowing licensed Indian fishermen access within five nautical miles of the IMLB, possibly in exchange for Sri Lankan access to India's EEZ.

Perpetual Lease - A proposal from Tamil Nadu to explore leasing Katchatheevu to India for fishing rights while Sri Lanka retains sovereignty could be considered as a creative diplomatic solution.

Community Engagement - Fostering direct cross-border dialogues between fishermen communities can help build trust and resolve shared concerns, with support from regional bodies like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

Conclusion

The Katchatheevu dispute, though rooted in complex historical and legal issues, is now primarily a humanitarian and economic conflict driven by the livelihoods of fishermen and amplified by political rhetoric. A sustainable resolution can be achieved by prioritizing sustainable fishing practices, consistent diplomatic dialogue, and the creation of alternative livelihoods, which would ensure stability in the Palk Strait and fortify bilateral relations.

Source - <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/katchatheevu-a-flashpoint-in-the-palk-strait/article70020557.ece>

