

Focus
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Katchatheevu Island**

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Introduction

Political parties heavily rely on compelling narratives, inspiring slogans, and strategic alliances to rally mass support before elections, particularly when their very existence in a specific region is at stake. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Tamil Nadu is currently grappling with an existential crisis following the departure of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) from the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in September 2023. Prior to this split, the BJP has faced significant challenges in establishing a strong presence in Tamil Nadu's complex political landscape since its founding in 1980. Its performance in the 2019 general elections was quite disappointing, capturing only a 3.66 per cent vote share without securing a single seat out of 39. This setback was further compounded by the loss of the only Lok Sabha seat it had won in 2014 in Kanniyakumari to the Congress.¹ These developments have put the BJP in a precarious position as it seeks to regain footing and relevance in Tamil Nadu's political arena.

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In the most recent elections, the BJP has undertaken a comprehensive overhaul of its approach in Tamil Nadu. This overhaul encompasses both its political strategies and its narrative, aimed at dispelling its image as a marginalised political entity in the state. Under the leadership of Annamalai Kuppusamy, the BJP is striving to increase its vote share to at least 25 per cent. Following its split from the AIADMK, the BJP has sought support from various caste groups, AIADMK dissidents, and smaller political parties. Notable in this realignment are O Panneerselvam, the former AIADMK treasurer, TTV Dhinakaran's Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam, and the Pattali Makkal Katchi.² Furthermore, there are reports of covert cooperation between the BJP and AIADMK in areas where they face vulnerabilities. The political strategy devised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi particularly targets the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a formidable force in most constituencies as part of the Congress-led Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA).

Beyond political manoeuvres, the BJP is also leveraging the sympathy vote by advocating for the rights of Tamil Nadu fishermen. These fishermen have been grappling with arrests and confiscation of fishing boats since 1974, when the Congress-led government of Indira Gandhi ceded the Katchatheevu Islet to Sri Lanka. As a result, Tamil Nadu fishermen are calling for the return of Katchatheevu and urging the central government to address this longstanding issue. According to the fishermen, their traditional rights have been eroded, as Katchatheevu and its surrounding regions are known for their rich abundance of fish and diverse marine life.

Exploiting the vulnerabilities of Tamil fishermen, Modi stated in a social media post:

Eye-opening and startling! New facts reveal how Congress callously gave away #Katchatheevu. This has angered every Indian and reaffirmed in people's minds—we can't ever trust Congress! Weakening India's unity, integrity and interests has been Congress' way of working for 75 years and counting.³

Echoing Modi's remarks, the Indian Minister for External Affairs Dr S Jaishankar said, "The Congress and the DMK, have approached this matter as though they have no responsibility for it, as though the situation is for today's Central Government to resolve. We now know not only who did it but also who hid it."⁴ This is not the first time Modi has criticised the Congress on the Katchatheevu issue. On 10 August 2023, Modi, in his speech at the Lok Sabha on the eve of opposition's no-confidence motion said that "Katchatheevu is an island between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. Somebody gave it to another country. It happened under the leadership of Indira Gandhi. Wasn't that part of Maa Bharati there?"⁵

What is Katchatheevu?

Katchatheevu is a small, uninhabited islet spanning approximately 285 acres. It lies in the Palk Straits, roughly 33 kilometres from the Indian coast and about 62 kilometres southwest of Jaffna, the northern point of Sri Lanka. ⁶ Katchatheevu and its surrounding area is renowned for its fish diversity and abundance. This region has been a subject of dispute

since the era of British rule. Post-independence, it remained a contentious matter between India and Sri Lanka due to undefined maritime boundaries. Eventually, the territory was relinquished by the Indian government, led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, to Sri Lanka nearly half a century ago. The transfer was marked by a ceremonial event. In 1974, Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, and her Sri Lankan counterpart, Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, signed the 'Indo-Sri Lankan Maritime Agreement'.



Source: www.indianexpress.com

Katchatheevu between Modi, Tamil Nadu and Central Government

The recent focus on the Katchatheevu matter was based on information acquired by Annamalai through a Right to Information (RTI) request. Modi, however, relied on what can be considered a partial truth, presenting the information as a charge sheet against the Congress. Official documents and parliamentary records show that the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had dismissed the

sovereignty claim issue over Katchatheevu as 'inconsequential'. In Nehru's minutes, included in a note prepared by then Commonwealth Secretary YD Gundevia and shared by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) as background information with the Informal Consultative Committee of Parliament in 1968, he wrote, "I attach no importance at all to this little island and I would have no hesitation in giving up our claims to it. I do not like this pending indefinitely and being raised again in Parliament."⁷ The former Indian Foreign Secretary, Kewal Singh, also acknowledged that Sri Lanka's stance on Katchatheevu was "very determined" and in Dutch and British maps the island was a part of the Kingdom of Jaffnapatnam.⁸

The central government's response to the demands of Tamil Nadu fishermen was limited to advising them to adhere to the agreement and remain within the boundaries of Indian waters. Even in August 2014, under the Modi government, the Attorney General at that time, Mukul Rohtagi, informed the Supreme Court during a hearing on the petition (seeking maritime agreements of 1974-1976 unconstitutional) filed by former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa in 2008, that "the island was given to Sri Lanka on the basis of a bilateral agreement in 1974. To retrieve it now, we have to go to war."⁹ The current Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, MK Stalin also wrote a letter to Modi to discuss the Katchatheevu issue with his Sri Lankan counterpart, Ranil Wickremesighe, ahead of the latter's visit to India in 2023. Even before that, in 2022, during a political gathering where Modi was present, Stalin asked Modi to help retrieve the Islet. He said, "To solve the important issue faced by Tamil Nadu fishermen, Katchatheevu should be retrieved, TN fishermen should be able to exercise their rights in their traditional

fishing zones... This is the right time to take action in this regard. I'm duty-bound to remind the Prime Minister (Modi) about this."¹⁰ The governments of both AIADMK and DMK have consistently urged the Indian central government to address this issue in the past. However, until recently, only Modi has sought to capitalise on the matter for political advantage. The reason behind the central government's cold response was the very fact that India officially is duty-bound to honour the maritime boundaries discussed and settled in 1974 and 1976. It is also important to note that India gained exclusive rights over Wadge Bank, a significantly larger area, through a 1976 agreement with the Sri Lankan government.¹¹

Katchatheevu: A Tale of Strong Friendship between India and Sri Lanka

Modi's recent statements sharply contrast with the historical stance taken by Jawaharlal Nehru regarding Katchatheevu Island. It seems that Modi may not be fully aware of the complex historical context surrounding the issue. Following the departure of the British from the Indian subcontinent, Ceylon found itself in a state of uncertainty regarding its future, initially perceiving itself as an appendage to India. However, under the leadership of JR Jayewardene, Ceylon actively resisted potential Indian influence and control. As the mid-1940s approached, the situation began to favor Jayewardene's aspirations for an independent nation. This was clearly articulated in a letter sent to Prime Minister Nehru in June 1945, in which Jayewardene strongly asserted his vision for Ceylon as a sovereign and independent nation. He commented: "I do not think that either the State Council, or the country will accept anything less than has been

promised to India and Burma, that is, the status of a free and equal partner in the Commonwealth of Nations.”¹² The shift in thoughts of Ceylon’s from a subordinate state to an independent nation heightened security concerns for India, particularly in light of India’s apprehensions about the growing influence of China, the US, and Australia in South Asia. However, following its independence, Sri Lanka pursued a foreign policy of strict non-alignment, fostering strong ties with India while advocating for a neutral global stance. This diplomatic approach was championed by the successive administrations of SWRD Bandaranaike and his wife Sirimavo Bandaranaike, and their commitments to neutrality deserve commendation.¹³

The credit from the Indian side goes to the then governments of India, who were able to secure their interests, especially their security interests, in the region with their diplomatic skills. The Indo-Sri Lankan Maritime Agreement stands as a testament to India’s diplomatic professionalism and helped sow the seeds of enduring friendship with Sri Lanka. Additionally, the conclusion of the Sirima–Gandhi Pact, which granted citizenship to Indian Tamils, speaks volumes about the strong friendship between the two countries. Despite the strong Sri Lankan claim on the Katchatheevu Islet, Indira Gandhi’s ceremonial surrender had a lasting impact on the people of Sri Lanka, which unfortunately has been undermined by Modi’s unwarranted remarks about reclaiming Katchatheevu.

Another viewpoint suggests that Mrs Bandaranaike approached Indira Gandhi to resolve the issue diplomatically, to pacify the Tamil ethnic community, which had been protesting for full control of northern and northeastern Sri Lanka.¹⁴ This

perspective may lack substance as the Tamils on the Sri Lankan side were mostly Indian Plantation Tamils and Sri Lanka has disputed with the Indian governments over repatriation of all the Indian Origin Tamils (IOT) by granting them Indian citizenship. The Sirima-Gandhi Pact of 1964 and 1974 substantiates this claim. Furthermore, if Sri Lanka was indeed at a disadvantage, how come Colombo maintained complete control of Katchatheevu? The agreement might have concluded in "shared rights" if Sri Lanka did not have strong legal backings. So, in a nutshell, the 1970s were a crucial era where the relationships between the two countries went through testing times and laid the foundation for stronger friendship.

Sri Lankan Stance on Katchatheevu

In response to Modi's comments, Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Ali Sabry, PC responded: "this is a problem discussed and resolved 50 years ago and there is no necessity to have further discussions on this. I don't think it will come up."¹⁵ Furthermore, with both Tamils and Sinhalese in agreement on this matter, there is no opportunity to exploit the Tamil card for personal or political gains or start negotiations on the Katchatheevu issue.

Right now, the main issue for Sri Lanka is not New Delhi or Colombo's claim over Katchatheevu, but the poaching of Indian fishermen in and around the Katchatheevu waters using bottom trawler vessels. This activity is causing significant damage to Sri Lanka's local fish population and endangering biodiversity. According to Ravindran Priya, a 37-year-old mother of three children from the local fishing community, "before all this happened (before Indian trawlers' intervention) we used to do

business of over 100 kilos of fish per day, but now we can do only about 10 to 15 kilograms a day. The Indian trawling issue has become a big problem in our day to day lives now. Because they arrive in hundreds, the amount of fish caught by our local vessels have decreased significantly, thus this issue reflecting adversely on our income."¹⁶

As per Captain Gayan Wickramasuriya, the spokesperson of the Sri Lanka Navy, there are approximately 400 bottom trawler vessels present at all times, making it highly challenging to deter and apprehend them. He said "When these vessels are not paying heed to warnings we take them into custody and bring them along to the Sri Lankan shores for the legal proceedings. Even this too has become tricky these days as some of these foreign vessels try to put up resistance when we approach them."¹⁷ Apart from illegal catchment of fish in the Katchatheevu region, Indian fishermen also steal rich-fish harvest from Sri Lanka. A number of incidents of looting and fighting are reported on daily basis. Damages to the maritime environment by Indians is another long story.

According to Jaffna District Fisheries Solidarity Movement President Rathnasingham Muralidaran, "before 2009, the Indian trawler issue was felt mainly in the areas of Mannar and Delft Island. But since then the problem spread like a plague in the fisheries areas of Kankesanthurai, Myliddy, Chundikulam, Kokku Thoduvai, Mullaitivu and Mannar. He further said that "those days the Indian boats would come only in the night. But now even in the broad daylight they come in great numbers towards the sea areas of Katchatheevu and Delft Island."¹⁸

The Sri Lankan government is actively seeking a resolution to the problems related to Indian fishermen's unlawful movements

and fishing. However, Modi has sparked a new debate on reclaiming the sovereign rights of the small island, which is not only misleading but also has the potential to disrupt the current efforts of the Sri Lankan authorities.

Conclusion

Modi's critique in the recent Lok Sabha elections held in Tamil Nadu on 19 April 2024, was primarily aimed at garnering political leverage. The repercussions of bringing up the longstanding Katchatheevu matter in Modi's favour are still ambiguous, especially with the election outcomes expected in early June 2024. As per the Indian government's stance, the ownership of the Katchatheevu Islet lies with Sri Lanka. Following the 1976 agreement, both Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen are forbidden from trespassing into each other's waters, with Indian fishermen permitted only to mend their nets and carry out ceremonial practices on the islet.

Modi's stance on Katchatheevu Island is largely driven by political motives, however, for the fisherfolk residing in the area, it is a matter of sheer survival. The conditions on the island are extremely harsh and challenging. Modi's recent intervention into the Katchatheevu issue may potentially complicate the ongoing efforts of Sri Lankan authorities to provide relief to their fisher community through the platform of the Joint Working Group. In the event that Modi secures a two-thirds majority, he might consider taking steps to reclaim the Katchatheevu Islet, which could have detrimental consequences on the traditionally strong diplomatic relations between India and Sri Lanka.

While Modi lacks viable plans for its retrieval, his retrieval mantra could spark tensions between the two friendly nations. Modi's foreign policy diverges from the ethical and forward-thinking principles of India's founding leaders. In particular, Modi's neighbourhood policy is excessively centralised and narrow. His foreign policy strategy remains fixated on specific power centres within neighbouring countries. Concerning Sri Lanka, Modi seems to overlook the sacrifices made by the Island to address New Delhi's (in)security concerns. Such narratives could embroil the Island in a 'taking sides' political scenario that is detrimental to both India and Sri Lanka. It is high time for Modi to contemplate decentralising his approach and respecting the sentiments of the people of the respective countries. If the citizens of Sri Lanka could challenge the dominance of the Rajapaksa regime successfully, a time may come when they resist India's hegemonic policies towards the island nation.

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