

# Katchatheevu Island

## Why In News

- **Katchatheevu, a small uninhabited island** in the middle of **India and Sri Lanka**, is making headlines again after Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched an attack against the Congress party for "callously" giving it away to Sri Lanka in 1974.



- “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!” he posted on X.

## What Is The Issue

- Prime minister’s post comes after documents obtained by **BJP Tamil Nadu chief K Annamalai** seemed to indicate that Congress never attached much importance to the tiny, uninhabited island.



- According to the report, **Jawaharlal Nehru** once even remarked that he would not hesitate “in giving up claims to the island” altogether.
- This story is not new — the circumstances in which India, under **Indira Gandhi’s prime ministership**, relinquished its claims over **Katchatheevu** in **1974** have been well documented. BJP’s Tamil Nadu campaign has, however, has made it among the state’s most hot button political topics.



## Where Is The Island Of Katchatheevu

- **Katchatheevu** is a **285-acre** uninhabited speck in the **Palk Strait**, between India and Sri Lanka. It is no more than **1.6 km** in length and slightly over **300 m** wide at its broadest point.
- It lies **northeast of Rameswaram**, about **33 km** from the Indian coast. It is about **62 km southwest of Jaffna**, at the northern tip of Sri Lanka, and **24 km** away from the inhabited Delft Island, belonging to Sri Lanka.



- The only structure on the island is an early 20th-century **Catholic shrine – St Anthony’s church**.
- **During an annual festival**, Christian priests from both India and Sri Lanka conduct the service, with devotees from both India and Sri Lanka making the pilgrimage. In 2023, 2,500 Indians made the journey to Katchatheevu from Rameswaram for the festival.
- Katchatheevu is not suited for permanent settlement as there is no source of drinking water on the island.

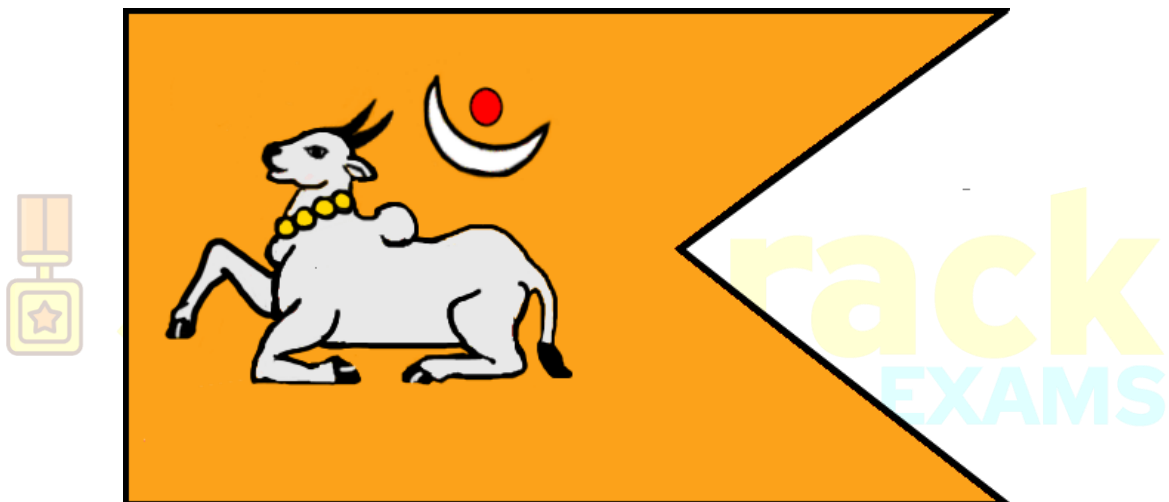


## What Is The Island’s History

- Being the product of a **14 century volcanic eruption**, Katchatheevu is relatively new in the geological timescale.
- In the early mediaeval period, it was controlled by the **Jaffna kingdom of Sri Lanka**.
- In the 17th century, control passed to the **Ramnad zamindari** based out of Ramanathapuram, about 55 km northwest of Rameswaram.
- It became part of the **Madras Presidency** during the British Raj.
- **But in 1921**, both India and Sri Lanka, at the time British colonies, claimed Katchatheevu in order to determine fishing boundaries.



- A survey marked **Katchatheevu in Sri Lanka**, but a British delegation from India challenged this, citing ownership of the island by the **Ramnad kingdom**.
- This dispute was not settled until 1974.



## What Is The Agreement Now

- In 1974, Indira Gandhi made attempts to settle the maritime border between India and Sri Lanka, once and for all.
- As a part of this settlement, known as the '**Indo-Sri Lankan Maritime agreement**', Indira Gandhi 'ceded' Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka. At the time, she thought the island had little strategic value and that ceasing India's claim over the island would deepen its ties with its southern neighbour.
- Moreover, as per the agreement, Indian fishermen were still allowed to access **Katchatheevu "hitherto"**.



- Unfortunately, the issue of fishing rights was not ironed out by the agreement. 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**".
- Another agreement in 1976, during the period of Emergency in India, barred either country from fishing in the other's Exclusive Economic Zone. Again, Katchatheevu lay right at the edge of the EEZs of either country, retaining a degree of uncertainty with regards to fishing rights.

## Why Is Katchatheevu Important For Indian Fishermen

- Most of the Indian fishermen who venture into the area and encounter action from the Sri Lankan authorities hail from Tamil Nadu, several media reports have said.



- During the time when the **DMK governed Tamil Nadu in 1974**, it contended that the Congress government had not considered its perspectives before signing the agreement with Sri Lanka. The party had organised several protests in response.
- **Under the leadership of J Jayalalithaa, the Tamil Nadu government** consistently raised concerns about the issue and even resorted to legal action.



- In anticipation of the **visit by Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe** to India last year, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin had written to PM Modi, urging for discussions on the matter.



- He later corresponded with PM Modi again after numerous fishermen were detained by the Sri Lankan authorities.
- In his letter dated February this year, Stalin further **emphasised the impact on the livelihood of Tamil fishermen**, citing the increasingly limited access to traditional fishing waters, which threatens the economic stability and social fabric of the communities dependent on the fishing industry.