

Katchatheevu: An unacknowledged Achilles' heel of Indian (and Lankan) nationalism

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Irritants like the ill-treatment of Tamil Nadu fishermen by the Lankan navy and the Lankans allowing China a foothold in the vicinity are now running into India's growing geopolitical heft and the Indian government questioning its predecessor's cession of Katchatheevu in the 1970s

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The tiny barren island of Katchatheevu – located between India and Sri Lanka, about twenty miles north of Adam's Bridge – stands out as an Achilles' heel of Indian (and Lankan) nationalism.

In “Nationalism in India” (1917), Rabindranath Tagore explored the conflict between “self-love” and “higher instincts of sympathy and mutual help”. Among illustrations in recent Indian history of this psychological war in geopolitical dimensions, the tiny barren island of Katchatheevu – located between India and Sri Lanka, about twenty miles north of Adam's Bridge – stands out as an Achilles' heel of Indian (and Lankan) nationalism. But does it have to remain this way?

Ceded by India, under the Indira Gandhi administration, to the Sirimavo Bandaranaike administration, Katchatheevu has often sprung back into news from terrains of oblivion, most recently when Prime Minister Narendra Modi alluded to it in the Lok Sabha. The island was donated as an act of goodwill, following the 1974-76 agreement and exchange of letters between India and Sri Lanka.

The cession contravened the precedent set in the Berubari Union case (1960) wherein the Supreme Court ruled that no Indian territory could be ceded without constitutional amendment.

Not A 'Barren Rock'

The failure of the agreements to accurately implement the fishing rights of Tamils has led to inadvertent marine border forays by Indian fishers from Rameswaram and neighbouring districts, resulting in them losing their gear and even lives at the hands of the Lankan navy. Since the 1980s, Tamil fishers approaching Katchatheevu have been the victims of a Sinhala-dominated navy's wrath stemming from memories of the civil war waged against it by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Katchatheevu is, in theory, a barren island (literally "katcha theevu") but resists that appellation in practice – its geostrategic values substantially exceed the sum of its parts. Once a bombing theatre for the British, postcolonial Lankans believed Katchatheevu contains petroleum reserves (recently the Lankan administration reportedly leased land around Delft Island and Katchatheevu to Chinese power companies).

Throughout the years of Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, and Indira Gandhi, India saw Katchatheevu as devoid of geopolitical significance. Meanwhile, for the Lankan civil society and political elites, the island evolved into a matter of "national prestige" – precisely the sentiment Nehru had abjured when it came to this midsea "barren rock".

Unresolved Colonial Legacies

Katchatheevu's cession was intended to befriend the Lankan administration in a tripartite bid to a) secure the Indian Ocean region from becoming a proxy battleground for American and Soviet navies, b) thwart the reported influence of Southeast Asian and Chinese geostrategic factions in Sri Lanka, and c) shield minority Lankan Tamils of Indian ethnic origins in the face of aggravating tensions with the majoritarian Sinhalese Lankan mainstream.

Today, as a much more powerful 21st century Indian nation state feels destined to justify Indic civilisational values to South Asia and the emerging geopolitical order, Katchatheevu's repressed colonial legacies are bound to resurface.

Katchatheevu, once part of the Ramnad Zamindari, was the hereditary estate of the Sethupathis. In 1767, the Dutch East India Company signed a lease agreement with Muthuramalinga Sethupathi and, in 1822, the British East India Company leased the

island from Ramaswami Sethupathi. In 1845, three proclamations issued by the Ceylonese governor outlined the Lankan territory without any mention of Katchatheevu.

In 1905, Seenikuppan Padayachi, a Ramnad merchant, built St. Antony's Church for fishermen of both territories to seek refuge or dry their lines. A 1922 Imperial Records Department report supports India's historic claim to the island by virtue of the island's ownership by the Raja of Ramnad.

Over a hundred years of archival records of Katchatheevu's leases signed between Indian merchants and British administrators – including the Madras High Court's judgment in the Annakumar Pillai V. Muthupayal case (1904) – demonstrates that Katchatheevu was in India and not Sri Lanka, a commonsense rarely questioned until the late 1960s.

Reclaiming Katchatheevu?

In 1968, the Colombo-based Sun ran a controversial headline – “Ceylon Government takes over Kachcha Thivu [sic]” – leading the Indo-Lankan Palk Bay fisheries disputes to dovetail into diplomatic interventions from both sides to secure peace in the region. India's political benevolence in the cession soon led to bitter frictions between the Centre and the Tamil Nadu government under Chief Ministers Karunanidhi and Jayalalithaa. In 2008, the latter filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court of India on the Katchatheevu question.

In 2014, Mukul Rohatagi, India's former attorney-general, cautioned that, since the bilateral agreements were not disputed between India and Sri Lanka, the Indian government would need to resort to war to reclaim Katchatheevu.

However, history has again resurrected the relevance of Katchatheevu's legal and geopolitical histories over which India and Sri Lanka need to rebuild consensuses – not merely because of a joint Tagorean obligation that ties the two (arguably, Tagore composed the musical symphonies of the national anthems of both nations), but also because of India's sustained acts of economic goodwill towards Sri Lanka in times of its dire need.

Arup K. Chatterjee is a Professor at OP Jindal Global University, and the author of The Great Indian Railways (2018), Indians in London: From the Birth of the East India Company and Independent India (2021), and Adam's Bridge (2024). Views are personal, and do not represent the stand of this publication.

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