



## NATIONAL PLATFORM FOR SMALL SCALE FISHWORKERS

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### The National Platform for Small Scale Fish Workers Rejects the Machinations of Political Parties to Hoodwink Small Scale Fish Workers by Whipping Up Jingoism on Katchatheevu Island



Electoral political parties are always after catching hold of issues that would provide them with mileage over their opposition, more so in election times. It does not matter if they docilely lived with the issues for years, or were even benefited by it. It is election time and Katchatheevu is a learning reminder.

#### What has been the story of Katchatheevu?

Katchatheevu, a tiny uninhabited island spanning 285 acres in the Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka, is located 33 km off the Indian coast to the northeast of Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu, and southwest of Sri Lanka's Delft Island. The tiny, barren island which, according to some official reports, was created following a 14th-century volcanic eruption, is 1.6 km in length and just 300 metres wide at its widest point.

India and Sri Lanka had been claiming Katchatheevu since at least 1921, after a survey placed the island within Sri Lanka's boundaries. This was contested by a British Indian delegation that cited the Ramanad kingdom's ownership of the island. The dispute could not be settled, and continued in the years after Independence.

In 1974, when Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister, the two governments signed — on June 26 in Colombo and June 28 in New Delhi — an agreement by which the island went to Sri Lanka, but Indian fishermen were given “access to Katchatheevu for rest, for drying of nets and for the annual St Anthony's festival”. “Indian fishermen and pilgrims will enjoy access to visit Katchatheevu as hitherto, and will not be required by Sri Lanka to obtain travel documents or visas for these purposes,” the agreement said. **The agreement did not specify the fishing rights of Indian fishermen.**

Thereafter, several letters were exchanged between the foreign secretaries of India and Sri Lanka, and a set of executive orders were issued on the Katchatheevu issue.

The negotiations and the orders essentially settled the maritime boundary between India and Sri Lanka by giving sovereign rights over a maritime patch called 'Wadge Bank' near Kanyakumari to India. The Wadge Bank lies to the south of Kanyakumari, and has been identified by the Fishery Survey of India as a 4,000-sq-mile area bound by 76°.30' E to 78°.00 E longitude and 7°.00 N to 8° 20' N latitude. **It is one of the world's**

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richest fishing grounds, and in a much more strategic part of the sea than the island of Katchatheevu. This area near Kanyakumari has been significant for fishermen from Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

An agreement reached between the two countries in March 1976 said “the Wadge Bank...lies within the exclusive economic zone of India, and India shall have sovereign rights over the area and its resources” and “the fishing vessels of Sri Lanka and persons on board these vessels shall not engage in fishing in the Wadge Bank”.

However, “at the request of the Government of Sri Lanka and as a gesture of goodwill”, India agreed that Sri Lankan boats licensed by India could fish in the Wadge Bank for three years “from the date of establishment by India of its exclusive economic zone”. But no more than six Sri Lankan fishing vessels were allowed, and their catch in the Wadge Bank could not exceed 2,000 tonnes in any year.

The agreement also said that if India “decided to explore the Wadge Bank for petroleum and other mineral resources” during the three-year period, the Sri Lankan boats “shall terminate fishing activity... in these zones with effect from the date of commencement of exploration”.

Evidently the negotiations between the states of Sri Lanka and India were not made primarily to safeguard the interests of the small-scale fishing communities of the two countries, nor were the small-scale fishing communities of the two countries had any right to participate in the negotiations. It was for sealing an agreement to ensure sharing of the resource rich areas of Palk Bay, obviously to plunder the same for filling the coffers of the rich.

It is common knowledge that Indian mechanised fishing fleet largely outstrips their Sri Lankan counterpart both by number and capacity, while the small-scale fishing fleet of Sri Lanka outnumbers those of India. Moreover, Sri Lanka has banned Bottom Trawling in July 2017 and use of mono-filament nets in July 2006. India, till date, is continuing with both and is contributing to destructive fishing in a much larger way than Sri Lanka. Evidently Indian mechanised fleet poses much larger threat to small scale fisheries in Palk Bay.

	Number of active fishers	Number of boats	Mechanized boats	Motorized boats	Non-motorized boats
Sri Lankan Fishery	47,680	11,670	317	6,003	5,350
			Trawlers & Gill Netters 30ft, 30 hp IBM	FRP Boats 18 ft, 8 to 25 hp OBM	Kattumarams and Wooden Canoes 9-15 ft.
Indian Fishery	61,162	9,912	1,907	4,141	3,864
			Bottom & Pelagic Trawlers 30-50 ft, 70-190 hp IBM	Vallams & FRP Boats 18-30 ft, 5-30 hp	Vattai's and Kattumarams 12-15 ft.
<b>A comparison of fishing capacity and fishers operating on the Sri Lankan and Indian side of the Palk Bay (2013)</b>					
<i>Ref: Interactive Governance for Small-Scale Fisheries, MARE Publication Series 13</i>					

However, in Tamil Nadu, the 1974 and 1976 settlement of the maritime boundary line between the two countries is, until this day, popularly perceived as a ‘gifting away’ of historical fishing grounds to Sri Lanka. The electoral political parties suppress the truth from the masses for their narrow political interests and foment enmities between the small scale fishers of the two countries.

The officially demarcated boundary, however, initially had little adverse impact on fishers, as their fleets were small and the boundary line poorly guarded. Onset of the civil war in Sri Lanka in 1983 changed this, Palk Bay became part of the battleground between government forces and the ‘Sea Tigers’, the navy wing of the Tamil Tiger guerrillas. While fishing in Northern Sri Lanka came to a virtual standstill, the rapidly developing trawler fleet in India fished the rich Sri Lankan fishing grounds. Smuggling increased. Several hundred fishermen lost their lives, mostly killed by the Sri Lankan navy.

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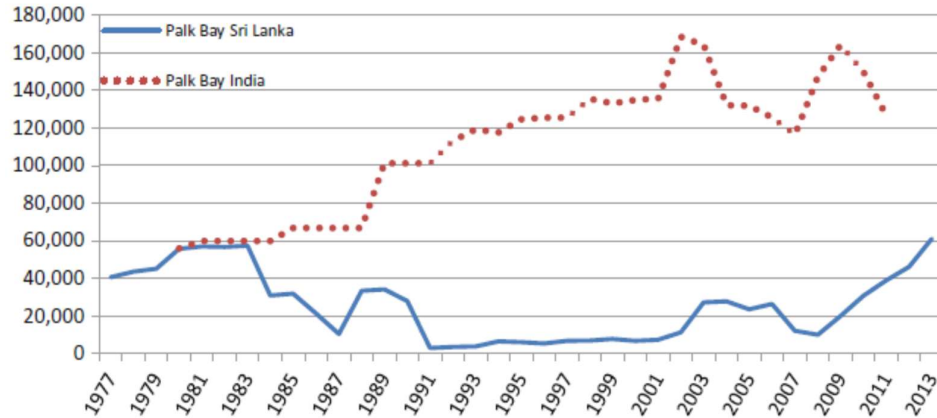
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A comparison of the catch from Palk Bay by Indian and Sri Lankan fishing fleet clearly indicates the preponderance of Indian fishing capacity over that of Sri Lanka.



**A Comparison of fish catch volume from Palk Bay by Indian and Sri Lankan fleets**

Ref: *Interactive Governance for Small-Scale Fisheries, MARE Publication Series 13*

### NPSSF observes that –

- The State of Sri Lanka and India, while drawing the agreements of 1974 or 1976, did not give the livelihood issues of the small-scale fishers any prime consideration and did not provide any mechanism to safeguard the livelihood of the small-scale fishers of both the countries. ***The governments of India and Sri Lanka should immediately sit together jointly with the small scale fishing communities of Tamil Nadu and Northern Sri Lanka to ensure and safeguard their livelihood rights.***
- The fishing trawlers of India backed by the government, primarily responsible for devastating the fish resources of Indian waters and ruining the livelihood of small-scale fishers of India, ventured into Sri Lankan waters to loot fish resources there and rob the Sri Lankan small scale fishers of their livelihood. ***Government of India should come up with a ban on bottom trawlers and monofilament fishing nets, as done by Sri Lanka, to ensure sustainable fishing in the fishing areas shared by the two countries.***
- The killings and incarceration of fish workers are grossly unjust and are violations of the United Nation's Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). ***India and Sri Lanka must establish a joint monitoring mechanism participated by the small scale fish worker organisations of both countries to ensure safety of life and fishing boats of the fishing communities.***
- Jingoism fomented by the political parties for their narrow electoral interests should be rejected by small scale fishing communities and all conscientious people of the two countries with disdain. Countries must not use their sovereignty within their respective borders to plunder the natural resources of our planet. ***The small scale fishing communities, as natural custodians of the fish resources gifted by nature, should come together for protection and sustainable use of those resources.***

Save Water, Save Fish, Save Fisher People  
Small Scale Fish Workers of the World Unite

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