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**1. What are the concerns about the Global Biodiversity Framework which aims to increase areas under forest cover, inland water, coastal and marine areas to at least 30% of the world's terrestrial area? What is the situation in India?**

**Why in News?**

A symposium on the rights of indigenous people organised by the University of Arizona on March 21-22 put the spotlight on the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and how, in conjunction with the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act of 2023, it will hit India's tribes the hardest. Many at the symposium foresaw doom for the country's indigenous communities already affected by the establishment of national parks.

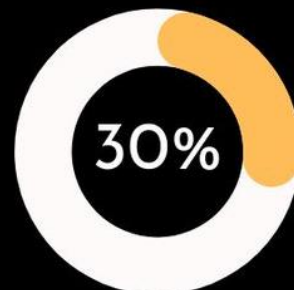
**What is the Kunming-Montreal GBF?**

This framework was adopted during the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in December 2022. It claims to support the achievement of sustainable development goals and build on previous strategic plans, paving "an ambitious pathway to reach the global vision of a world living in harmony with nature by 2050."

Accordingly, four goals were set for 2050. Participating at the event, New Delhi-based rights activist drew the attention of environmentalists and leaders of indigenous communities to Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal GBF, which aims to "increase terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services" to at least 30% of the world's terrestrial area. At present, protected areas (PAs) cover about 16%.

**What is the 30x30 Target?**

Target 3, popularly known as the 30x30 Target under the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, is an initiative led by a coalition of governments and NGOs that aims to protect and conserve **30%** of the Earth's land and oceans by **2030**.



### **What are its implications?**

Participants at the 'Symposium on Conservation, Racism, and Indigenous Peoples Human Rights' felt that the seemingly benign goals of the GBF tilt the scale in favour of corporate houses eyeing forest resources at the expense of the indigenous communities living with nature. Indigenous peoples have been denied the right to housing, health, education, electricity, and security.

Involving the private sector in forest conservation is a bad idea and India has taken a step in that direction with the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act to 2023 to include zoos, safaris, ecotourism facilities, etc., as forest activities, Activists pointed out.

### **What would GBF mean for India?**

About 84% of India's national parks (89 out of a total of 106) were established in areas inhabited by the indigenous peoples and meeting the GBF targets will threaten their existence, the activists said. For instance, the initiative to upgrade the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary in Rajasthan to a tiger reserve will affect 162 tribal villages located inside and outside the sanctuary. The gazette notification states that the sanctuary "is free from encroachment as per record, there are no rights and concessions of any person in the area" but the Khasis possess documents showing they have been living in the area since 1914.

### **What can be done to protect the tribal lands?**

An activist said a multilateral agreement like the Kunming-Montreal GBF cannot be amended but the government of India needs to change its policy.

First, it has to recognise the right to free, prior, and informed consent as guaranteed under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act and make further amendments to the laws to make the tribals custodians of the Protected Areas as nature has largely been protected because of their special relations with the forests and their denizens.

Secondly, Human rights issues of these people such as access to education, healthcare, and housing cannot be left to the Wildlife or Forest Department. Thousands of indigenous people living within the PAs must be respected and recognised for preserving the biodiversity and the ecosystem and not punished.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

Source: Indian Express

## **2. Story of Katchatheevu island**

### **Why in News?**

BJP has once again attacked the Congress about its decision to "callously give away" the island of Katchatheevu. What is the story of the island?

### **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.

### **How did the Sri Lankan Civil War impact Katchatheevu?**

However, between 1983 and 2009, the border dispute remained on the back burner as a bloody civil war raged in Sri Lanka.

With the Sri Lankan naval forces preoccupied with their task of cutting off supply lines of the LTTE based out of Jaffna, incursions by Indian fishermen well into Sri Lankan waters were commonplace. Bigger Indian trawlers were especially resented as they would not only tend to overfish but also damage Sri Lankan fishing nets and boats.

In 2009, the war with the LTTE ended, and things dramatically changed. Colombo beefed up its maritime defences, and turned focus to Indian fishermen. Facing a depletion of marine resources on the Indian side, they would frequently enter Sri Lankan waters as they had been doing for years, but finally began facing consequences.

Till date, the Sri Lankan navy routinely arrests Indian fishermen and there have been many allegations of custodial torture and death. The demand for Katchatheevu is revived each time such an incident happens.

### **What is Tamil Nadu's position on Katchatheevu?**

Katchatheevu was "given away" to Sri Lanka without consulting the Tamil Nadu state assembly. At the time itself, there were vehement protests against Indira Gandhi's move, citing the historical control of the Ramnad zamindari over the island and traditional fishing rights of Indian Tamil fishermen.

In 1991, in the aftermath of India's disastrous intervention in the Sri Lankan Civil War, the Tamil Nadu Assembly again sought retrieval of Katchatheevu and restoration of fishing rights of Tamil fishermen. Since then, Katchatheevu has time and again come up in Tamil politics.

In 2008, then AIADMK supremo, the late J Jayalalitha, filed a petition in court saying Katchatheevu could not be ceded to another country without a constitutional amendment. The petition argued the 1974 agreement had affected traditional fishing rights and livelihoods of Indian fishermen.

After becoming chief minister in 2011, she moved a resolution in the State Assembly and, in 2012, went to the Supreme Court asking her petition be expedited in the wake of increasing arrests of Indian fishermen by Sri Lanka.

Last year, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and DMK leader MK Stalin wrote a letter to PM Modi ahead of Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's visit to India, asking the PM to discuss key issues, including the matter of Katchatheevu.

"The transfer of Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka, by the Union government, without the state government's consent, has deprived Tamil Nadu fishermen's rights and adversely impacted their livelihoods," the letter said, referring to the Tamil Nadu government's protests in 1974.

As previously reported, Stalin also mentioned the attempts by former chief minister M Karunanidhi, including an appeal to the then PM in 2006, for the retrieval of Katchatheevu in order to create "congenial conditions for Tamil Nadu fishermen to lead a peaceful life". However, the Union government's position on Katchatheevu has largely remained unchanged. It has argued that since the island had always been under dispute, "no territory belonging to India was ceded nor sovereignty relinquished."

While the BJP, especially the party's Tamil Nadu unit, has been vocal in its demand for retrieving Katchatheevu for India, even the Narendra Modi government has done little to actually act on Tamil politicians' demands – there is little it can do.

As then Attorney General Mukul Rohtagi had told the Supreme Court in 2014: "Katchatheevu went to Sri Lanka by an agreement in 1974... How can it be taken back today? If you want Katchatheevu back, you will have to go to war to get it back."

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: Indian Express