

I write to request you to kindly instruct the Ministry of External Affairs to accord political clearance for the visit of pilgrims from the fishermen community of Tamil Nadu to participate in the postponed consecration ceremony of the newly constructed St. Antony's Church at Katchatheevu.

As you are aware the consecration ceremony was scheduled to be held on 7.12.2016, and the Chief Secretary, Government of Tamil Nadu had written to the Foreign Secretary seeking political clearance for the visit of pilgrims from Tamil Nadu to Katchatheevu. It was indicated that as per the request of the Parish Priest of St. Joseph's Church, Vercode, Rameswaram, about 100 pilgrims desire to attend the event. However, the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India vide their letter dated 5.12.2016, conveyed No Objection from the political angle for the visit of only 20 persons from Tamil Nadu to attend the consecration ceremony.

Subsequently, due to the unfortunate and sad demise of the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, our revered leader Puratchi Thalaivi Amma, it was conveyed that the Government of Sri Lanka has postponed the ceremony. The further date for the consecration ceremony has not been indicated.

As you are aware, the St. Antony's Church at Katchatheevu holds considerable cultural and religious significance to lakhs of fishermen devotees from Tamil Nadu, and a large number of them are very keen to participate in the consecration ceremony. In this context, the political clearance accorded for the participation of only 20 persons will disappoint the ardent devotees, who consider the St. Antony's Church as part of their essential cultural and religious heritage. Our revered leader Puratchi Thalaivi Amma, had also written to you on 14.5.2016, that the construction of the St. Antony's Church should be taken up jointly by the Indian and Sri Lankan sides in view of the joint heritage of fishermen from both sides. The fishermen from Tamil Nadu are very keen on protecting their traditional and customary access to this important place of worship.

In this context, considering the sentiments attached to the event and the well recognized inalienable right of the fishermen of Tamil Nadu to participate in the ceremonies of the St. Antony's Church, Katchatheevu, I request you to kindly direct the Ministry of External affairs to facilitate the participation of all fishermen devotees from Tamil Nadu who wish to participate in the consecration ceremony of the newly constructed St. Antony's Church at Katchatheevu, without placing any restrictions on the numbers.

I request your kind urgent action in the matter.

**Issued By:- DIPR, Secretariat, Chennai - 9.**