



## FISHERMEN ISSUE - GS II MAINS

**Q.** Why does the fishermen issues become persistence between India and Sri Lanka? Also bring out the complications in attaining a solution to the fishermen issue. (15 marks, 250 words)

**News:** *'Attacks on fishermen rising on Sri Lankan waters': MK Stalin urges PM to intervene*

### What's in the news?

- Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin has written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, expressing concern about the rising number of attacks on fishermen from the state by unidentified persons. Stalin sought the Prime Minister to intervene and secure the release of fishermen arrested by Sri Lanka for allegedly trespassing in its waters.

### Key takeaways:

- In a letter, Stalin said 88 Indian fishermen were arrested and 12 boats were seized by Sri Lankan authorities in the past 28 days.

### Backdrop:

- **Palk Strait and Gulf of Mannar** are major fishing grounds for both the countries.
- Given the proximity of the territorial waters of both countries, especially in the Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar, incidents of straying of fishermen are common.
- Indian boats have been fishing in the troubled waters for centuries and had a free run of the Bay of Bengal, Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar until 1974 and 1976 when treaties were signed between the two countries to demarcate **International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL)**.
- However, the treaties failed to factor in the hardship of thousands of traditional fishermen who were forced to restrict themselves to a meagre area in their fishing forays.
- The **small islet of Katchatheevu**, hitherto used by the Indian fishermen for sorting their catch and drying their nets, fell on the other side of the IMBL.
- Fishermen often risk their lives and cross the IMBL rather than return empty-handed, but the Sri Lankan Navy is on alert, and have either arrested or destroyed fishing nets and vessels of those who have crossed the line.

### Reasons for the Arrest of Indian Fishermen by Sri Lanka:

#### 1. Crossing Borders:

- Indian fishermen often enter Sri Lankan waters, leading to their arrest.
- For example, 69 fishermen have been arrested this year for such violations.



## 2. Destructive Fishing Practices:

- They are accused of using bottom trawling, which is banned in Sri Lanka since July 2017.
- This method is harmful to marine life and the livelihood of Sri Lankan fishermen.

## 3. Geographical Constraints:

- Under the Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Act 1983, Indian fishermen can operate only beyond three nautical miles from their coast.
- The proximity of the International Maritime Boundary Line, just nine nautical miles away, leads to frequent unintentional crossings.

## Implications of the Arrest of Indian Fishermen by Sri Lanka:

### 1. Increased Tensions:

- The arrests contribute to ongoing tensions between India and Sri Lanka, affecting diplomatic relations.

### 2. Humanitarian Concerns:

- The fishermen face long detentions, with some remaining in custody for months. This raises humanitarian issues.

### 3. Financial Losses:

- The confiscation of expensive fishing equipment, like nets and boats, leads to significant financial hardships. In 2024, 10 boats were seized.

### 4. Impact on Diplomatic Relations:

- Despite high-level diplomatic interventions, including agreements for periodic meetings and working groups, the issue remains unresolved, indicating strained relations between India and Sri Lanka.

## Fishermen's Concern:

### 1. Depletion of marine resources on the Indian side:

- Arrests and attacks increased on Indian fishermen as they continued entering Lankan waters because of depletion of marine resources on the Indian side.

### 2. Katchatheevu Island:

- While the unpopular truth in the entire conflict is accusations about Tamil fishermen entering Sri Lankan waters, ownership of Katchatheevu Island, where Tamil fishermen had traditional fishing rights for centuries, also remains an unresolved issue.
- In 1974, the island was ceded to Sri Lanka after an agreement was signed by Indira Gandhi between the two countries without consulting the Tamil Nadu government.
- The agreement allowed Indian fishermen "access to Katchatheevu for rest, for drying of nests and for the annual St Anthony's festival" but it did not ensure the traditional fishing rights.

### 3. Proliferation of trawlers in Indian Coast:

- Trawlers are mechanized boats with highly exploitative fishing nets unlike most of the poor fishermen on the Sri Lankan coast who use traditional fishing methods.
- Each trawler travels up to 18kms towards Talaimannar and Katchatheevu in search of better catch. And in recent years, they often return with huge losses due to plummeting resources and restrictions on Sri Lankan waters.



## Government Measures:

### Joint Working Group:

- India and Sri Lanka agreed to set up a Joint Working Group (JWG) on Fisheries in **2016** as the mechanism to help find a permanent solution to the fishermen issue.
- The JWG also includes representatives from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the Coast Guards and Navies of both countries.

### Terms of Reference of the JWG:

- Expediting the transition towards **ending the practice of bottom trawling at the earliest.**
  - Bottom trawling is an industrial fishing method where a large net with heavy weights is dragged across the seafloor.
- When the weighted nets and trawl doors are dragged along the seafloor, everything in their path is disturbed or destroyed, including seagrasses, coral reefs or rock gardens where fish hide from predators.
- **Framing procedures for returning fishermen arrested by both sides.**
- **Possibility of joint patrolling.**

### Issues Ahead:

#### 1. Failure in implementing joint working group resolutions:

- Earlier both sides agreed for no violence or loss of life while handling the fishermen. A hotline was established between the respective Coast Guards for that. However, the proposed hotline has not been operationalized yet.

#### 2. Alternate solutions failed:

- The plan to replace Tamil Nadu fishermen trawlers with deep-sea fishing vessels has not been successful.

#### 3. Failure of direct talks:

- Attempts to negotiate a settlement through direct talks between fishermen from both sides have also failed.

#### 4. Inability to find a common ground:

- Sri Lanka favours an immediate ban on unsustainable fishing practices such as bottom trawling.
- While Tamil Nadu fishermen want a lengthy phase-out period for the same.

#### 5. Insensitivity of Tamil Nadu Political leaders:

- Political leaders in Tamil Nadu fail to acknowledge that incursion into Sri Lankan waters by the State's fishermen contribute immensely to the problem.



## WAY FORWARD:

### 1. Promote Alternative Fishing Methods:

- As India has promised to end bottom trawling and incentivize deep-sea fishing under the Blue Revolution Scheme, more efforts are needed to ensure this transition.

### 2. Respect Maritime Boundaries:

- Educate and equip fishermen to avoid crossing into Sri Lankan waters, considering the close proximity of the International Maritime Boundary Line.

### 3. Regularize Diplomatic Talks:

- Implement the agreed-upon bi-annual meetings between the Ministers of Fisheries and ensure the Joint Working Group on Fisheries meets every three months as planned.

### 4. Address Humanitarian Concerns:

- As emphasized by Indian Prime Minister, treat the issue as a humanitarian concern, focusing on the well-being of the fishermen and their families.



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