

# The Palk Bay Conflict: Sustainable Solutions to India- Sri Lanka Fishermen Dispute

December 5, 2024

**Souparnika Suresh**

*Research Scholar, St. Joseph's University, Bengaluru*

**Dr. Karamala Areesh Kumar**

*Head, Department of International Relations, Peace and Public Policy, St. Joseph's University, Bengaluru*



The recent arrests of 17 Indian fishermen in Sri Lankan waters on grounds of illegal fishing have again sparked attention on the fishermen's disputes between India and Sri Lanka, compelling a collaborative approach from the countries for sustainable solutions. According to an official release by the Sri Lankan Navy, over 400 arrests and 55 trawler seizures have occurred this year.<sup>1</sup> The livelihood of Indian fishermen is disrupted by the frequent arrests for illegal "poaching" on the Sri Lankan side, where they are accused of violating the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL).

The Palk Bay is a 64-kilometre-long stretch of ocean between Sri Lanka and the southernmost part of Tamil Nadu, India, where Katchatheevu Island is located. The fishing rights over this island

---

**The Blue Revolution in India and the worldwide spike in shrimp demand dubbed the "Pink Gold Rush" led Indian fishermen to use sophisticated and unsustainable trawling methods, which increased tensions between the two countries as Indian fishermen began invading Sri Lankan waters in search of larger catches**

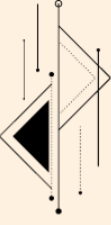
---

**In addition to increasing bycatch, bottom trawling disrupts the reproductive cycles of fish populations. It can take thousands of years for marine resources to recover, which emphasises how vital sustainable fishing methods are to protecting aquatic ecosystems.**

---

are at the centre of the controversy. India ceded Katchatheevu Island to Sri Lanka in the 1974 and 1976 maritime border agreements.<sup>2</sup> Due to their exclusion from the negotiations and the drafting of these agreements, Tamil Nadu fishermen were displeased with this decision. Despite being the ones most impacted by the accords, their exclusion prevented them from voicing their interests and concerns.

The fishing ban enforced during the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) has significantly hampered local fishermen in Sri Lanka. The Blue Revolution in India and the worldwide spike in shrimp demand dubbed the "Pink Gold Rush" led Indian fishermen to use sophisticated and unsustainable trawling methods, which increased tensions between the



two countries as Indian fishermen began invading Sri Lankan waters in search of larger catches, motivated by overfishing on the Indian side. Sri Lankan fishermen continued to use antiquated trawlers and traditional fishing methods even when the fishing ban was lifted, which led to poorer yields than those of their Indian counterparts, who used more advanced gear. This imbalance in productivity led to heightened tensions in the region as Sri Lankan fishermen struggled to compete effectively.

### Causes of the Conflict

Palk Bay's muddy seabed, fed by the Vaigai and Cauvery rivers, and nutrient-rich deposits make for abundant finfish and shellfish in the fishing areas. Commercially essential species found here include prawns, tuna, and a wide variety of 44 finfish, crustaceans, and molluscs that are highly sought after for export to markets in the USA, Japan, and Western Europe.<sup>3</sup> To meet this demand, Indian fishermen adopted bottom trawling methods, which involve using big nets to scrape the ocean floor to increase the quality of their catch. The fishing gear of local Sri Lankan fishermen has suffered significant damage due to this practice, which has amplified the conflict between the two communities.

Palk Bay is surrounded by five districts in India and three in Sri

Lanka. Native fishermen in these areas have been interacting through religion, migration, literature, and intermarriage for centuries, and as a result, they share a common language, culture, and festivals. The St. Anthony's Church festival on Katchatheevu Island draws thousands of pilgrims, mostly fishermen. Although the 1976 agreement allowed Indian fishermen to dry their nets on the island, it did not specify if they were allowed to fish in the surrounding waters, which caused dissatisfaction among the Tamil Nadu fishermen. Furthermore, under this agreement, the Wadge Bank—a historically significant fishing location for Sri Lanka—was declared part of Indian territory. According to Sri Lanka, illicit fishing activities by Indian fishermen in its waters cause it to lose around US\$40 million annually.<sup>4</sup>

For violating maritime boundaries, the Sri Lankan navy has routinely detained Indian fishermen and seized their trawlers; nevertheless, they are frequently released to maintain diplomatic relations. Enforcement needs to be improved in India despite the establishment of cooperative working groups and legislative mechanisms to control fishing activities. Attempts to resolve the issue are further complicated by political groupings in Tamil Nadu strongly opposing the idea that

Indian fishermen illegally poach in Sri Lankan waters.

### Implications

The equilibrium of ecosystems is significantly impacted over time by unsustainable fishing practices. These activities put tremendous strain on marine resources, especially when combined with overfishing and the growing number of traditional and modern trawlers. In addition to increasing bycatch, bottom trawling disrupts the reproductive cycles of fish populations. It can take thousands of years for marine resources to recover, which emphasises how vital sustainable fishing methods are to protecting aquatic ecosystems.

The death of several Indian fishermen, including incidents of shooting and instances of individuals reportedly missing, raises grave concerns.<sup>5</sup> Sri Lankan authorities seize their fishing boats upon their capture, which puts further financial hardship on them. This problem has become a major political challenge between the two countries. Given Sri Lanka's close geographic proximity to India, it impacts trade, military supervision, and economic ties.

In addition, security concerns are raised by China's growing military and economic sway over Sri Lanka, highlighting India's need to foster cordial ties with its neighbour.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, there



have been significant risks from the illicit trafficking and smuggling of weapons and ammunition, especially during the Sri Lankan Civil War. This situation undermines stability for both nations by making security measures more difficult and escalating regional tensions as illegal activity entangles itself with legal fishing issues.

### Sustainable Solutions

A total ban on bottom trawling is unlikely to resolve the problem effectively until sustainable alternative fishing methods are introduced. To reduce the impact on the seabed, the FAO suggests using longlines and bottom-set gillnets as feasible solutions.<sup>7</sup> Environmental harm can also be reduced by mapping the seabed and increasing the effectiveness of bottom trawlers. Another favourable substitute includes electro-trawling. Governments should consider enacting laws that offer financial incentives to encourage the transition to sustainable fishing methods, while further research is required to create efficient shrimp fishing methods.

While maintaining Sri Lanka's sovereignty, a land lease arrangement for Katchatheevu Island may allow Indian fishermen to use the nearby waters. This arrangement can be modelled after the Tin Bigha agreement between Bangladesh and India. Ecological equilibrium could be restored by controlling

fishing during the reproductive seasons of endangered species. To foster collaboration, the Tamil Nadu government should think of providing authentic identification cards to fishermen recognised by both countries. A cooperative surveillance system that involves pertinent stakeholders can significantly reduce illegal poaching and successfully address violations along the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL).<sup>8</sup> This framework may also help combat drug trafficking and unlawful smuggling that comes from the Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent.

Permits for Indian fishermen to operate in designated areas of Sri Lankan waters should be agreed upon by both countries. Since both countries are parties to UNCLOS, international litigation would offer a legal foundation for collaboration and conflict resolution. However, this is a grey area since India has previously breached several obligations under UNCLOS due to this issue.<sup>9</sup> However, bringing this matter to UNCLOS would garner international attention and force both countries to adopt strong measures. The dispute between Sri Lanka and India over fishermen has several facets, including social, political, economic, and environmental aspects. Resolving the crisis will require effective diplomatic interaction between the two nations, reflecting on the

interests of the various stakeholders involved. To achieve sustainable practices and regional peace, this cooperative approach is essential.

### References:

<sup>1</sup>M S Thanaraj (2024, September 29). Sri Lankan Navy arrests 17 Indian fishermen from Rameswaram. The New Indian Express.

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2024/Sep/29/sri-lankan-navy-arrests-17-indian-fishermen-from-rameswaram>

<sup>2</sup>V. Suryanarayan (n.d.). The India-Sri Lanka fisheries dispute: Creating a Win-Win in the Palk Bay. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2016/09/the-india-sri-lanka-fisheries-dispute-creating-a-win-win-in-the-palk-bay?lang=en>

<sup>3</sup>Amaralal, K. H. M. L., Abeykoon, N., & Deepananda, K. H. M. A. (2021b). Indo-Sri Lanka fishing conflict in the Palk Bay and its implications for fisheries. *Journal of the Indian Society of Coastal Agricultural Research*, 39(2), 140.

<https://doi.org/10.54894/jiscar.39.2.2021.10627>

<sup>4</sup>Gamage, R., & Gupta, I. (2023c). Resolution of the India-Sri Lanka maritime border conflict and fisheries dispute. ISAS Working Paper.

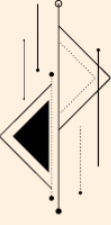
<https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ISAS-Working-Paper-369.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>Tnn. (2012b, August 18). 85 fishermen killed by Sri Lanka in 10 years: Govt. The Times of India.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/madurai/85-fishermen-killed-by-sri-lanka-in-10-years-govt/articleshow/15540452.cms>

<sup>6</sup>Sanyal, Debendra. (2023). CHINA-SRI LANKA RELATIONS.

<https://orcasia.org/article/381/china-sri-lanka-relations>



<sup>7</sup>Options to mitigate bottom habitat impact of dragged gears. (n.d). <https://www.fao.org/4/a1466e/a1466e00.htm>

<sup>8</sup>Gamage, R., & Gupta, I. (2023c). Resolution of the India-Sri Lanka maritime border conflict and fisheries dispute. ISAS Working Paper. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ISAS-Working-Paper-369.pdf>

<sup>9</sup>Majumdar, Bodhisattwa., & Malhotra, Ankit. (2020). The Fishing Wars: Maritime Border Conflicts between Sri Lanka and India. Michigan Journal of International Law. [https://www.mjionline.org/the-fishing-wars-maritime-border-conflicts-between-sri-lanka-and-india/#\\_ftn1](https://www.mjionline.org/the-fishing-wars-maritime-border-conflicts-between-sri-lanka-and-india/#_ftn1)

---

***Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this article are of the author solely. TheRise.co.in neither endorses nor is responsible for them. Reproducing this content without permission is prohibited.*