



Fisherman Issue with Sri Lanka

For Prelims: Location of Katchatheevu Island and Palk Bay Strait

For Mains: Impact of Fishermen issue on India Sri Lanka Relations and what India is doing in this direction

Why in News

Recently, as many as **43 fishermen from Tamil Nadu were arrested** and six boats seized by Sri Lankan Naval personnel.

- A total of **284 Indian fishermen** were arrested by Sri Lanka in **2019 (210) and 2020 (74)**.
- Earlier in 2020, the [Fourth Meeting of the India-Sri Lanka Joint Working Group \(JWG\)](#) on Fisheries was held through virtual mode.



Key Points

- **Background:**
 - Both Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen **have been fishing into the Palk Bay area for centuries**.
 - Palk Bay is a **semi-enclosed shallow water body** between the southeast coast of India and Sri Lanka.
 - Problem emerged only after a **maritime agreement** was signed by India and Sri Lanka in **1974**.
 - In fact, initially the **1974 border agreement** did not affect fishing on either side of the border.
 - In 1976, through an exchange of letters, **both India and Sri Lanka agreed to stop**

fishing in each other's waters.

- In 1974 and 1976 treaties were signed between the two countries to demarcate the **International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL)**.
 - The treaties also ended up making the Palk Strait connecting India and Sri Lanka a **'two-nation pond'**, under the relevant [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea \(UNCLOS\)](#) rules to the exclusion of all third nations.
 - Simply put, the bilateral arrangement bans international fishing and shipping.
 - However, the agreement could not stop the fishermen from fishing in these waters, as **fishermen know no boundary**.
 - Despite the signing of **maritime boundary agreements**, fishermen communities of both the countries continued their fishing in the Palk Bay area peacefully until the **Eelam war broke out in 1983**.
 - Nonetheless, after the **end of War in 2009**, the Sri Lankan fishermen have been raising their objection to Indian fishermen fishing in their waters.
 - Later, India and Sri Lanka agreed to set up a **Joint Working Group (JWG)** on Fisheries in 2016 between India and Sri Lanka as the **mechanism to help find a permanent solution to the fishermen issue**.
- **Katchatheevu Island Issue:**
 - The **small islet of Katchatheevu, hitherto used by the** 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 continuation:**

- The main problem with Indian fishermen is that **a large number of them are dependent on fishing** in Sri Lankan waters, which is prohibited by the **1976 Maritime Boundary Agreement**.
- Also, a **large number of Indian fishermen are dependent on trawling** which is banned in Sri Lanka.

- **Related Initiatives Taken:**

- The IMBL is imaginary, but it was geo-tagged and is visible to the fishermen, due to [Global Positioning System \(GPS\)](#) sets.
- **Deep Sea Fishing Scheme:**

- Promoted as an **alternative to bottom trawling by Tamil Nadu's fishermen** off the Palk Bay, the scheme envisages the provision of 2,000 deep sea fishing boats in place of trawlers by 2019-20, which will be the third and final year of implementation of the scheme.
 - It aims to **put an end to disputes arising between the two countries.**
 - It has been taken up under the **'Blue Revolution' scheme.**

Way Forward

- The fishing equipment that is **prohibited in Sri Lanka must be banned by India** in the Palk Bay.
 - Fishing practises that do irreparable damage to marine ecology must be given up.
- The damage to the Indian fishermen could be ameliorated if the announcement is followed by two steps.
 - The **trawlers can be used in the Odisha coast where waters are very deep**
 - Trawlers could, with certain modifications, be used as smaller fishing vessels that cater to the mothership.
- India can **transform the Palk Bay from a contested territory to a common heritage.**
 - The first step is to **recognise that there are various stakeholders**—two Union and provincial governments, the Navies and Coast Guards, fisheries departments and above all, fishing communities of the two countries.
 - The next step should be to form a **Palk Bay Authority (PBA)** consisting of marine ecologists, fisheries experts, strategic specialists and government representatives.
 - The PBA could **determine the ideal sustainable catch**, type of fishing equipment that can be used, and the number of fishing dates for Sri Lankan and Indian fishermen.
 - The focus should be on **enrichment of marine resources** and improvement of the livelihoods of fishermen.

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