

INDIA-SRI LANKA FISHERIES DISPUTE – INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

NEWS: *The maritime boundary between India and Sri Lanka, particularly in the Palk Strait, has been a long-standing contentious issue. Allegations of illegal fishing, destructive fishing practices, and frequent arrests of Indian fishermen by the Sri Lankan Navy have fueled diplomatic tensions between the two nations.*

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

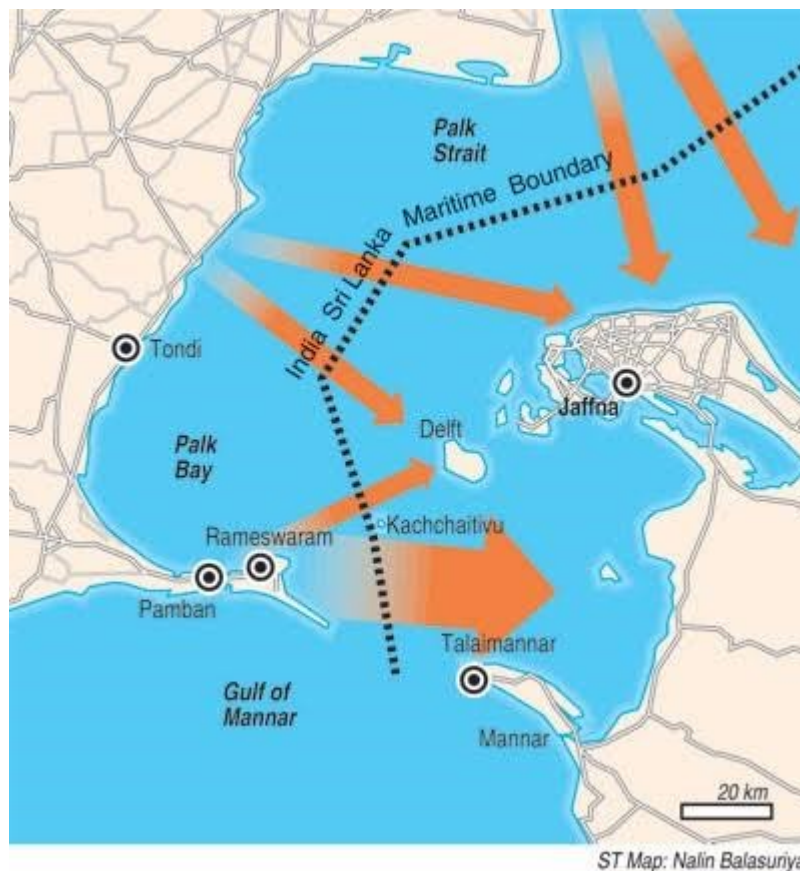
India-Sri Lanka Maritime Dispute: A Comprehensive Overview

India and Sri Lanka have formally defined their maritime boundary through a series of agreements, primarily focusing on territorial waters, exclusive economic zones (EEZ), and fishing rights. However, despite these agreements, maritime conflicts, especially related to fishing rights and territorial sovereignty, continue to strain bilateral relations.

Historical Agreements on Maritime Boundaries

1. **1974 Agreement:** India officially recognized Sri Lanka's sovereignty over Katchatheevu, a small, uninhabited island located in the Palk Strait. Indian fishermen were allowed limited rights to dry their nets and rest on the island, but they were prohibited from fishing in its surrounding waters.

2. **1976 Agreement:** This agreement extended the maritime boundary between the two countries and further imposed restrictions on fishing rights, limiting fishing activities



exclusively to each country's territorial waters. This effectively curtailed the traditional movement of Indian fishermen beyond the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL).

Key Issues in the Maritime Dispute

1. Recurrent Arrests and Seizures

- Indian fishermen, particularly from Tamil Nadu, frequently cross the **International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL)** in search of fish due to declining fish stocks in Indian waters.
- Sri Lankan authorities respond to these incursions by arresting fishermen, confiscating their boats, and taking legal actions. This has led to recurring diplomatic tensions between the two nations.

2. Violation of the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL)

- The IMBL, established under the **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**, serves as the official demarcation of territorial waters.
- Indian fishermen argue that they have historical fishing rights that extend beyond the IMBL and claim that traditional fishing grounds in Sri Lankan waters should remain accessible to them. This has resulted in continued legal and diplomatic disputes.

3. Ecologically Destructive Fishing Methods

- **Bottom trawling**, a method used predominantly by Indian fishermen, is a significant concern for Sri Lanka as it causes irreversible damage to marine habitats and leads to rapid depletion of fish stocks.
- Sri Lankan fishermen and environmental activists advocate for sustainable fishing practices to prevent over-exploitation and ensure long-term conservation of marine resources.

4. National Security Concerns

- Sri Lanka has expressed concerns that organized **trawler intrusions** into its waters could be misused for illegal activities, including smuggling and arms trafficking.
- There are fears that remnants of **Tamil militant groups** or criminal networks could exploit fishing disputes to carry out unlawful operations under the guise of fishing activities.

5. Katchatheevu Island Dispute

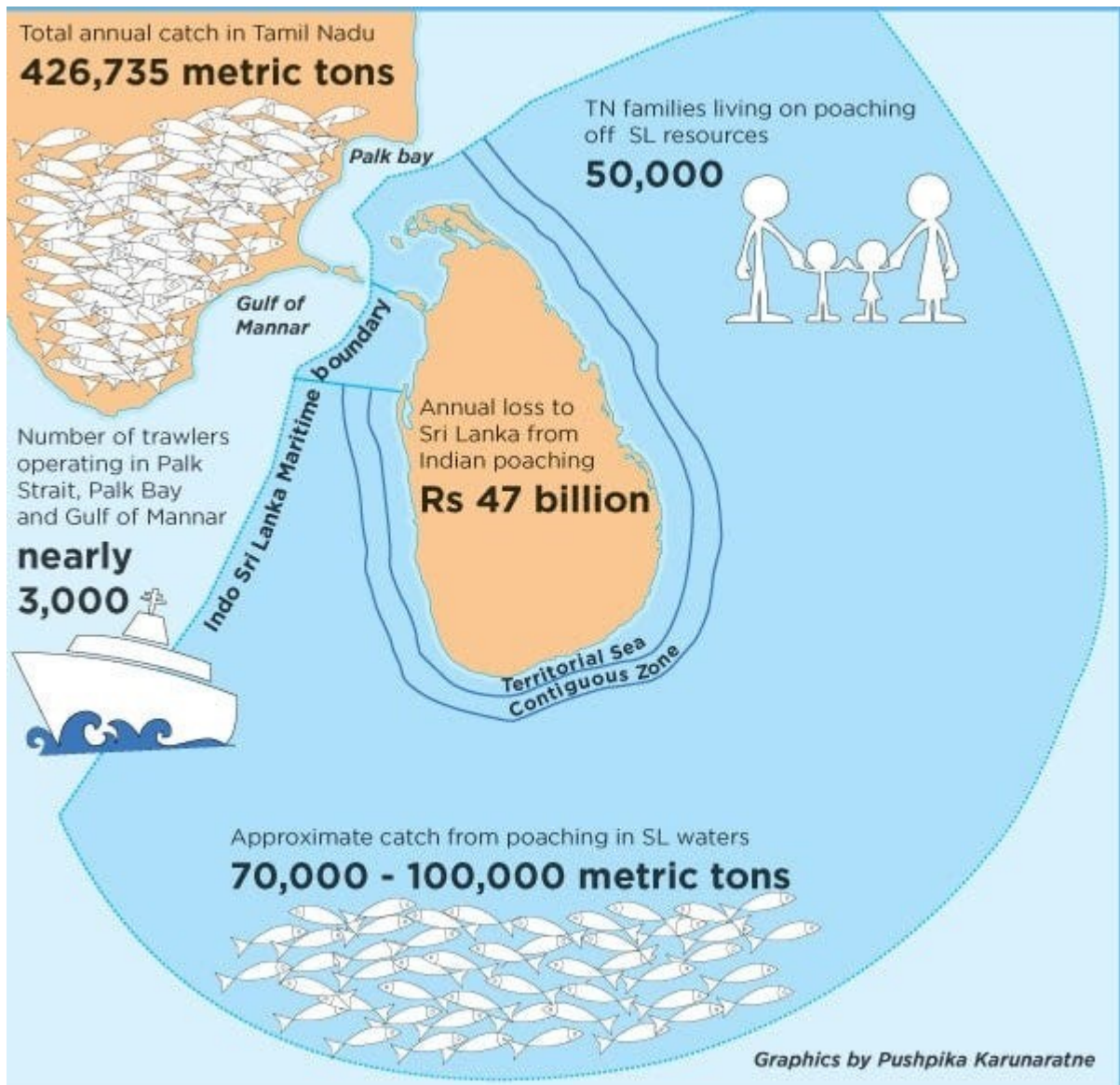
- Although India ceded **Katchatheevu Island** to Sri Lanka under the 1974 agreement, the issue remains politically sensitive in Tamil Nadu.
- Indian fishermen continue to assert their traditional rights over the island, and Tamil Nadu politicians periodically demand its return to India, keeping the dispute active in public discourse.

6. Livelihood Crisis and Economic Hardships

- Due to declining fish stocks in Indian waters, many Indian fishermen are compelled to enter Sri Lankan waters in search of a better catch, leading to frequent conflicts.
- Sri Lankan Tamil fishermen, who are recovering from the economic devastation caused by the **civil war (1983–2009)**, face economic distress as Indian incursions impact their livelihood opportunities.

International Laws on Fishing Rights

- **UN Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA, 1995)**: This agreement mandates that nations comply with **Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs)** when accessing international fisheries to ensure fair and sustainable utilization of marine resources.
- **UNCLOS (1982)**: Under **Article 87**, fishing activities in the high seas are restricted for states that fail to adhere to internationally established conservation measures.



Recent Developments in the Maritime Dispute

- **Diplomatic Talks & Agreements:** India and Sri Lanka have held multiple rounds of discussions, with Sri Lanka urging India to take strict action against bottom trawling.
- **Joint Working Group on Fisheries:** A bilateral mechanism has been established to address fishing disputes and explore sustainable solutions.
- **Deep-Sea Fishing Initiatives:** The Indian government has launched various schemes to encourage deep-sea fishing as an alternative to traditional near-shore fishing. However, the adoption of these initiatives has been slow due to high costs and lack of awareness.
- **Continued Arrests:** Despite diplomatic efforts, the arrest of Indian fishermen remains a persistent issue, with multiple incidents reported in **2023, 2024, and early 2025**.

Potential Solutions for the Maritime Dispute

1. **Bilateral Agreements on Fishing Rights:**

- A structured agreement between India and Sri Lanka could allow regulated access to Sri Lankan waters for Indian fishermen under specific conditions, ensuring fair utilization of resources.
2. **Encouraging Technology and Sustainable Fishing Practices:**
 - Indian fishermen should be incentivized to shift away from destructive fishing methods like bottom trawling and adopt **sustainable fishing techniques**.
 - Investment in **deep-sea fishing** should be promoted as a viable alternative to reduce dependence on Sri Lankan waters.
 3. **Joint Patrolling and Monitoring Mechanisms:**
 - Enhanced cooperation between **Indian and Sri Lankan Coast Guards** can prevent illegal fishing and ensure that fishermen are treated fairly in case of violations.
 4. **Compensation and Alternative Livelihood Support:**
 - The Indian government should provide **financial aid and alternative employment opportunities** for fishermen affected by fishing restrictions to reduce the economic burden on coastal communities.
 5. **People-to-People Diplomacy and Community Engagement:**
 - Facilitating direct **dialogues between Indian and Sri Lankan fishing communities** can help foster mutual understanding, reduce conflicts, and encourage cooperative resource management.

Conclusion

The India-Sri Lanka maritime dispute is a **multifaceted issue** with deep economic, diplomatic, and ecological implications. While **diplomatic negotiations and legal agreements** continue, a long-term resolution requires a **comprehensive approach** that integrates:

- Sustainable fishing practices
- Alternative livelihood opportunities
- Strengthened maritime cooperation
- Bilateral agreements ensuring equitable access to fishing resources

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/troubled-waters-on-india-sri-lanka-and-the-fisheries-dispute/article69203470.ece>