

India - Sri Lanka: Fishermen Issue

What is the issue?

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In a latest incident, the Sri Lankan Navy allegedly fired at a group of Indian fishermen who had allegedly crossed over into Sri Lankan waters on the lookout for a fresh catch.

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What are the major reasons?

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- According to **Joint Working Group on Fisheries (JWGF)** data, 111 boats of Tamil Nadu fishermen and 51 Indian fishermen were in arrest or detention in Sri Lanka's Northern Province.

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- Reasons include on-going disagreement over the territorial rights to the island of Kachchatheevu, frequent poaching by Indian fisherman in Sri Lankan waters, and the damaging economic and environmental effects of trawling.

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- Due to the dearth of multi-day fishing capability, Indian fishermen cannot shift their fishing effort from the Palk Bay area to the offshore areas way beyond the continental shelf.

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- Also, due to a gradual drop in fish count in the Indian waters, Indian fishermen are forced to wander into Sri Lankan waters as the catch is insufficient here.

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What is the issue of Kachchatheevu?

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- One of the major reasons complicating the issue is of Kachchatheevu Island.

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- **India ceded the uninhabited island to its southern neighbour in 1974 under a conditional accord.**

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- In fact, initially the 1974 border agreement did not affect fishing on either sides of the border.

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- In 1976, through an exchange of letter, both India and Sri Lanka agreed to stop fishing in each other's waters.

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- In 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared Kachchatheevu Island as sacred land owing to a Catholic shrine's presence on the piece of land.

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- The issue arises more out of a domestic tussle rather than the India-Sri Lanka view on the issue.

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- The Central government of India, according to the 1974 accord, recognises Sri Lanka's sovereignty over Kachchatheevu.

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- Tamil fishermen believe that Kachchatheevu is traditionally their territory and so they have a right to fish there.

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- The Sri Lankan authorities believe that this endangers the livelihood of Sri Lankan fishermen.

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Was there any recent initiative taken by the govts?

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- In November 2016, an inter-ministerial delegation discussed terms for a joint working group but the Sri Lankan delegation rejected India's request for a three year grace period so that the government can assist fishermen to move from bottom trawling fishing method to another sustained and effective method.

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What is the way ahead?

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- **India can try to get back the island of Kachchatheevu on "lease in**

perpetuity”.

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- Permit licensed Indian fishermen to fish within a designated area of Sri Lankan waters and vice versa.

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- There is a glaring **need for institutionalisation of fishing in Indian waters** by the government of India so that alternative means of livelihood are provided.

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- Government will have to mark up a comprehensive plan to reduce the **dependence of Indian fishermen on catch from Palk Bay.**

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Source: The Indian Express, IDSA

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