

# Illegal fishing by Indian trawlers violating the maritime boundary of Sri Lanka and its impact on livelihood and the Indo-Sri Lanka relations

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**Abstract** - Although, Indian and Sri Lankan fishing communities shared Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar as their common fishing grounds for centuries, crossing of maritime boundaries for fishing purposes was prohibited after ratifying maritime boundary agreements in 1974 and 1976. However, Indian fishermen frequently enter into Sri Lankan waters and carry out illegal fishing creating numerous conflicts. This study aims to identify the nature of illegal fishing practices carried out by Indian fishermen in the territorial waters of Sri Lanka and its impact on livelihood and the Indo-Sri Lanka relations. Primary data were collected from different stakeholders in Mannar and Jaffna areas through questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and secondary data were obtained from government institutions were used in this study. This study revealed that around 1000-1500 mechanized trawlers are coming to Palk Strait, Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar regions three days per week to catch prawns and demersal fishes. Their average daily catch mainly consists of prawns ( $56 \pm 11$  kg; 31%), demersal fishes ( $116 \pm 18$  kg; 65%), sea cucumbers and squids ( $6 \pm 3$  kg; 3%) and they have harvested approximately 1900 tons of shrimps and 4000 tons of demersal fish in 2016. Around 98% stake holders responded that Indian poaching is the biggest threat for their livelihood. It was found that 22% of fishers permanently lost their livelihood and others are facing livelihood insecurities. Both countries have proposed some actions such set up Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to expedite the release and handover of fishermen, intensify the cooperation on patrolling, and establish a hotline between coast guards of two countries to solve this problem, however, still could not find a long term solution. The northern Fishing community strongly suggests that the government of Sri Lanka must take strict security measures to protect its maritime border and actions to secure livelihood of fishers.

**Keywords:** Maritime boundary, Illegal fishing, Diplomatic missions

## **Introduction**

Sri Lanka is an island nation situated off the southeast coast of India. The maritime boundary of India and Sri Lanka is very close in the Palk Bay region where the minimum distance between the two countries is 16 km between Dhanushkodi on the Indian coast and Thalaimannar on the Sri Lankan coast (Vivekanandan, 2001). The fishing communities on either side of the Palk Bay, who are believed to have a common origin, have shared this area as a common fishing ground for centuries. However, crossing of maritime boundaries for fishing purposes was prohibited after ratifying maritime boundary agreements in 1974 and 1976 (Madanayaka, 2015). However, it is well evident that Indian fishermen routinely cross the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) by violating the agreement between two countries and enter into Sri Lankan territorial waters to carry out fishing operations as most of the fishery resources in Indian side have been already overexploited and depleted. According to recent statistics, there are around 5500 trawlers in Rameswaram and out of these around 2500 boats are directly depend on fishery resources in Sri Lankan waters (Adams, 2015; Vivekanandan, 2001)

The number of Indian fishermen enters into Sri Lankan territorial waters to carry out Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing by using illegal fishing method reported to be increased day by day creating numerous conflicts among fishermen of India and Sri Lanka, the governments of India and Sri Lanka and the Tamilnadu government. Several attempts, including diplomatic involvements have been carried out to solve this problem permanently, but still both countries fail to find a concrete solution to resolve this conflict.

This study was mainly focused to identify the nature of IUU fishing carried out by Indian trawlers in the territorial waters of Sri Lanka and its implication on livelihood and the Indo-Sri Lanka relations. An attempt was also made to identify the diplomatic mission carried out by the two countries to solve this problem to identify a long lasting solution.

## **Methodology**

Both Primary and secondary data were used in this analysis. Primary data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews targeting randomly selected fisherfolks, military personals, professionals and academics in Mannar and Jaffna areas. Secondary data were obtained from the Sri Lanka NAVY, Ministry of Foreign affairs and Ministry of Fisheries. Data were analyzed qualitatively.

## **Results**

### ***Nature of illegal fishing***

Around 1000 – 1500 mechanized boats of 32-42 feet, powered by 80, 100 and 120 HP are coming to Palk Strait, Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar region (Figure 1) three days (Monday, Wednesday and Saturday) per week to carry out illegal fishing practices in the territorial waters of Sri Lanka. According to our observation Indian fishers are coming from Tamil Nadu, Andra and Rameswaram and all most all these fishers intentionally cross the maritime boundary of Sri Lanka for better fishing opportunities as Palk bay and Gulf of Mannar areas are very productive shallow fishing ground rich with natural seagrass beds and benthic communities.



Figure 1: A snapshot of Indian Trawling in Sri Lankan waters (left side) and fishing vessel used by Indian poachers (Right side)

Bottom trawling which is prohibited in Sri Lanka is the main fishing gear used by Indian fishers and their average daily catch mainly consists of prawns ( $56 \pm 11$  kg; 31%), demersal fishes ( $116 \pm 18$  kg; 65%), sea cucumbers and squids ( $6 \pm 3$  kg; 3%). Green tiger prawn (~90%) is the most dominant prawn in their catches and average price of 1 kg of green tiger prawn ranges from 650 – 750 LKR. Emperors, breams, snappers and groupers are the predominant demersal fish varieties and market price per 1 kg of demersal fishes ranges from 350 – 400 LKR. According to available statistics, in 2016, ~35,600 Indian trawlers have engaged illegal fishing in Sri Lankan waters harvesting approximately 1900 tons of shrimps and 4000 tons of demersal fish. Normally they carry out 2-6 hauls per day making huge damage to the sea bed and associated seagrass beds, destroying feeding, nursery and breeding grounds of most of the fish and non-fin fish varieties as well as benthic communities.

### Illegal fishing and livelihood impact

Fishermen of Northern Sri Lanka were extremely affected by the 30 years of war and now they consider the Indian poaching is the biggest threat to their livelihood. Around 98% of stakeholders responded that the livelihood of coastal fishers in the Mannar and Jaffna areas has been severely affected due to this Indian poaching and it was found that 22% of fishers permanently lost their livelihood due to the destruction of their fishing gear and vessels by Indian trawlers. The fishers who involve in their traditional fishing practices can now earn around 600 – 800 LKR per day, which is a three to 4 fold reduction of their usual income. More than 87% of fishers complained that they are not able to compete with Indian trawlers as they are using small mechanized boats (18 feet FRP boats powered by 9, 15 or 25 HP) or non-mechanized boats and their fishing gear are not very efficient as bottom trawlers used by Indians. Situation of Sri Lankan fishermen is grim as they cannot face the invasion by huge Indian fishing fleets therefore, fishermen avoid fishing on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday with fears of damaging their fishing gear by huge Indian fleet. More than 92% of stakeholders concluded that bottom trawling has made adverse impact to the fish stocks as well as species diversity, especially in the Gulf of Mannar area by destroying sea bed and associated benthic communities and generating of the huge amount of by-catch and discards. The findings of this study indicate that fishers in this area fail to generate sufficient income to meet their basic needs through their traditional fishing practices which are their main income source for centuries. Fishermen in Jaffna and Mannar regions strongly highlighted that they are facing livelihood insecurities as a result of poaching their livelihood resources by Indians using illegal fishing practices and resulting permanent damages to highly productive and diverse fishing grounds in the Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar regions. Further, 73% of stakeholders pointed out that they are facing difficulties of getting fish for their daily consumption for a reasonable price as most of

the fish resources are taken by Indian fishers, limited access for local fishers to regular fishing and lack of proper security to carry out their traditional occupation.

### **Indo-Sri Lanka Diplomatic involvements**

Sri Lanka and India have carried out several diplomatic missions to solve this conflict and several actions have been proposed and implemented from the recent past. Some of these recently proposed actions include setting up Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to expedite the release and handover of fishermen, ensure that there is no physical harm or loss of life while apprehending fishermen by both sides, intensify the cooperation on patrolling and periodic interaction between the coast guards of two countries, establish a hotline between the coast guards of two countries to ensure quick decision making, releasing vessels in each other's custody. It is claimed that one of the biggest threat for the Indo-Sri Lanka relations are the charges leveled by Tamilnadu fishermen and the government against Sri Lanka Navy of shooting and killing Indian fishermen who cross into Sri Lankan waters. According to Tamilnadu government, there were 167 incidents of shooting by the Lankan Navy during the last 10 years by killing 85 fishermen and injuring 180. Sri Lanka must address this issue promptly to avoid a serious crisis in the future

The Sri Lanka government strongly suggests that bottom trawling practices need to end at the earliest and Indian side assured that bottom trawling would be phased out in a graded time bound manner. Indian fishing fleets are rapidly growing and illegal fishing in the limited sea areas of the Palk Strait and Gulf of Mannar will not sustain for long time due to conflicts that have been arose fishermen in two countries as well as the rapid depletion of fishery resources due to overexploitation and destruction of highly productive marine ecosystem and benthic communities as a result of the use of harmful and illegal fishing practices like bottom trawling. The Indian government is trying to take some actions such as directing of Indian fishing vessels to the international waters off the south of the Indian peninsula to reap good harvests and implementing buy back of existing trawlers to find a permanent solution for this problem. However, solving of this problem even through a diplomatic discussion seems to be not easy as Tamilnadu expects to reclaim the Kachchatheevu Island on "lease in perpetuity" and permit license to Indian fishermen to fish within a designated area of Sri Lankan waters.

Northern fishing community of Sri Lanka raises a strong voice that the government of Sri Lanka must take strict security measures to protect its maritime border and the affected fishing community must be looked after by making an urgent action plan to ensure their livelihood with introducing additional income sources and alternative fishing activities. Further, they highlighted Indian government and the state government of Tamilnadu must take quick and prompt action to discourage Indian fishermen crossing into Sri Lankan waters.

### **Conclusion**

The livelihood of the northern fishing communities of Sri Lanka has been badly affected due to illegal fishing practices carried out by Indian trawlers violating the maritime boundary of Sri Lanka. Both India and Sri Lankan governments are trying to find a permanent solution to this Indo-Sri Lanka fishing conflict in diplomatic level but yet to fail to find a creative solution.

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