

PALK BAY FISHING DISPUTE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Sri Lanka

Fisherfolk stage a protest at Thangachimadam in Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu, following the death of four fishermen in Palk Strait. | Photo Credit: [Balachandar L](#)

Samson Darwin was a toddler when his family fled their home in Jaffna in the 1990s, to escape the civil war that was tearing apart Sri Lanka's north and east. Mandapam camp in Ramanathapuram became their "home". Away from incessant bombing and destruction, they thought they had another chance at life.

Last week, 28-year-old Darwin's [body was brought back home](#) after [he and three other fishermen died in the Palk Strait](#), in Sri Lankan waters. Darwin's wife (they got married just a year ago) had given birth to their first child weeks before that, and just as their new life as a family was about to begin, his life ended.

Also read | [New Delhi conveys 'strong protest' to Colombo over death of Indian fishermen in Palk Strait](#)

Darwin fled the civil war nearly 25 years ago but the adversity that began chasing him then came a full circle that fatal night. "After escaping the battle in Sri Lanka, we came here [Ramanathapuram]... but Darwin died in the hands of the Sri Lankan Navy," a relative says, requesting anonymity. He echoes the grief that pervades their village following the tragic death of Darwin, along with A. Mesiya (30), V. Nagaraj (52) and S. Senthil Kumar (32), all hailing from Ramanathapuram, on the night of January 18.

Outraged by the incident, Tamil Nadu fishermen have accused the Sri Lankan Navy, which was patrolling the seas for "poaching" fishing trawlers, of killing the four men. The Sri Lankan Navy, on the other hand, maintains that the fishermen and their boat "sank" while "resisting arrest" by a Navy vessel.

The Indian government conveyed its "strong protest" to Sri Lanka, and insisted it adopt a humanitarian approach in dealing with fishermen. Sri Lanka's Fisheries Minister [Douglas Devananda, a Tamil from Jaffna, set up a three-member committee](#) tasked with finding a "permanent solution" to the Palk Bay fisheries conflict, affecting fishermen of Tamil Nadu and northern Sri Lanka.

None of the official statements mentions a probe being sought or agreed to. The four Tamil Nadu fishermen and the Sri Lankan Naval personnel alone were witnesses to what happened late that night, mid-sea, and only one side is alive to tell their story.

Editorial | [Troubled waters: On Palk Bay fishing conflict](#)

"What wrong did my brother do? He was unarmed and he has been brutally killed," says A. Simon, Mesiya's older brother, in his thatch-roofed hut in Thangachimadam, a predominantly fishing village in Ramanathapuram. "Whenever we set out fishing we pray that we return home safely, irrespective of whether the catch is good or not. The innocent fishermen's end is horrifying."

That too at sea, to which their lives are so intimately tied. Fisherfolk wake up to the sound of the sea, head to the waters for a living, come back to the shore, catch some sleep at odd hours,

again with the reassuring sound of the waves. “After fishing for about 30 hours, we return to the shore. On many days, the Sri Lankan Navy, under the pretext of surveillance, chases us. Sometimes they throw stones at our boats or hurl empty liquor bottles,” says another fisherman mourning Mesiya’s death.

Fishermen’s representatives in Tamil Nadu accuse the Sri Lankan Navy of injuring hundreds of fishermen over the years. “About 300 of our fishermen have died in the Palk Strait,” says P. Sesu Raja, Rameswaram-based leader of a fishermen’s association engaged mostly in bottom trawling. The Sri Lankan Navy has consistently denied the mounting allegations — through the years of the war and since it ended in 2009.

Also read | [Long-term solution to Palk Bay conflict elusive: Sri Lankan fishermen](#)

While the cause of death of the deceased fishermen has never been established in a court of law, the fact that these young fishermen died at sea remains a grim reminder of the human cost of the Palk Bay fisheries conflict. Their distressing death, when they were out at sea to earn a day’s living, is yet another stark reflection of a long-festering problem — of depleting marine resources in the Palk Bay, competing livelihoods of fishermen, and a solution that remains elusive, as the fishermen on both sides are unable to agree on it.

Tamil Nadu fishermen are not a homogenous group with the same interests. They are part of a complex ecosystem of moneyed and often politically influential owners of trawler fleets who engage other fishermen; of those who practise traditional fishing in their small, mechanised boats; and thousands of poor fishermen who have only their labour to sell in order to survive. Depending on who you ask, a different aspect of the problem comes to light.

Like Sesu Raja, most owners of the 5,000-plus registered trawlers say that the Sri Lankan Navy “attacked our fishermen”, arrested them, or seized their vessels.

Also read | [Deep sea fishing scheme makes slow progress](#)

Daily wage fishermen speak of the enormous pressure on them to risk their lives and go as far as it takes to get a decent catch that would ensure a day’s earnings in full.

Arockia Sesu, 47, from Thangachimadam, who has been fishing for 29 years, says he makes about 700 on a good day. With a family of five, including his elderly mother and two children, making both ends meet is no easy task. “Earlier, it was just poverty which we had to battle. But in recent years, we also have to safeguard ourselves from the Sri Lankan Navy’s aggression,” he says.

Despite the GPS units attached to their boats, the fishermen often stray into Sri Lanka’s territorial waters, across the International Maritime Boundary Line, mutually agreed upon by the neighbouring countries in the mid-1970s.

Also read | [In Palk Bay, goodwill slips through fishing nets](#)

India embraced mechanised fishing using bottom trawlers, after its fishing fleet was “modernised” between the 1950s and the early 1970s, with millions of dollars from the Norwegian government.

In the fishing method of bottom trawling, fishermen drag large nets from the vessels through the sea, virtually scooping out young fishes, shrimps and other organisms from the seabed indiscriminately. Some use *thangoosi valai* or monofilament nets, widely considered harmful for

marine species.

The catch, using these methods, has proved significantly higher, boosting the State's exports. Data from the Fisheries Department show that Tamil Nadu exports about 1.28 lakh tonnes of sea food, amounting to 5,591 crore.

Also read | [India must demonstrate goodwill in fishermen issue, says Sri Lankan Minister](#)

For the export-oriented governments at the Centre and State, and profit-driven owners of trawlers, the practice gradually became an addiction despite the serious environmental implications along the Tamil Nadu coast, periodically highlighted by scientists.

Small-scale fishermen, too, bear the brunt. In Pudukkottai district, further up the coast, small-scale fishermen spoke of how the trawlers have struck a huge blow to their livelihoods. "They [trawlers] return with huge catches thus depleting the marine resources and depriving the smaller mechanised boat fishermen of Pudukkottai district of good catch," said B. Balamurugan, president of the Mechanised Boats Association in Jagadapattinam, from where over 200 mechanised boats using traditional fishing practices operate.

The trawlers are not just at the centre of an international conflict but have also bred local conflicts, points out Chinna Adaikkalam, President of the Kottaipattinam Mechanised Boat Owners Association. "The longer-sized and higher capacity Karaikal trawlers have resorted to long durations of fishing, for almost 15 days, leaving hardly anything for us in our seas," he says.

Comment | [Is 'deep sea fishing' the silver bullet?](#)

Intuitively chasing fish, Tamil Nadu fishermen employed in the larger, mechanised trawlers regularly veer into Sri Lankan waters. The ecological damage is comparatively less on the Sri Lankan side because most Sri Lankan fishermen do not engage in bottom trawling. It is the prospect of a bigger catch that pushes Tamil Nadu fishermen to risk encountering arrest by the Sri Lankan Navy or worse, death.

Over time, Sri Lankan fishermen grew more vocal about the adverse effects of bottom trawling along their coastline. Their catches fell, and livelihoods were threatened.

Fishermen on both sides speak of a time when they shared cordial ties. "We would call each other *machaana* and *maapilai* [brother-in-law and son-in-law]. We would share our porridge, *karuvaadu* [dried fish] and beedis. They would give us cigarettes and biscuits," Sesu Raja recalls. Sri Lankan fishermen too reminisce about a time when they took an overnight boat journey to catch the latest M.G. Ramachandran film in Rameswaram and return the following day.

Also read | [Indian trawlers are back, say Sri Lanka's fishermen](#)

But the Sri Lankan civil war and the growing use of mechanised bottom trawlers in India have strained their ties. For a good part of the nearly three-decade civil war, fishermen in the northern Jaffna peninsula and the Vanni were barred access to the sea, as the Sri Lankan Navy, along with the armed forces, was taking on the LTTE.

It is when the war ended in 2009 that the fisherfolk, most of them displaced in the years of strife, returned to their homes, and gradually began to rebuild their lost livelihoods. However, their return to sea was far from smooth: they found their catch dwindling after Indian trawlers ravaged their seas at least thrice a week, and their nets, often bought with huge loans, getting caught

and damaged under the trawlers.

The Sri Lankan Navy stepped up surveillance, arresting fishermen and seizing trawlers “trespassing” into Sri Lankan waters. Since 2010, more than 3,000 Indian fishermen, all from Tamil Nadu, have been arrested by the Navy. As of today, 12 fishermen and more than 60 trawlers are in Sri Lankan custody. The issue has remained a sensitive bilateral issue, but the Central, State and provincial governments in India and Sri Lanka have achieved little success, besides “paying lip service”, fishermen note with distrust.

[Sri Lanka banned bottom trawling in 2017](#), and in 2018, imposed large fines on foreign vessels fishing illegally in its waters. While arrested fishermen have been released periodically, at times after a considerable diplomatic push by New Delhi, the 60-odd trawlers seized since remain in custody. Their owners in India are yet to come to Sri Lanka, to appear in court and pay the fine, before reclaiming the vessels, say officials in Sri Lanka’s Fisheries Department.

Talks at the governmental level, as well as among fishermen, have not resulted in a durable solution. With heightened surveillance and increased arrests making news in late 2020, [India and Sri Lanka resumed bilateral talks](#), after a three-year gap, in December 2020, through a [Joint Working Group](#) with senior officials from both sides.

Apart from government-level talks, fishermen leaders from both countries have held discussions several times since 2004. They met at least six times between 2010 and 2015 – in both India and Sri Lanka – when the Palk Bay conflict intensified. Tamil Nadu fishermen could not keep their promise of “phasing out” trawlers, and also refused to agree to Sri Lankan fishermen’s demand that bottom trawling be fully stopped as a goodwill gesture. Talks remain deadlocked since.

Also read | [Sri Lanka calls for joint patrols to resolve fishing issues with India](#)

“It is not possible to find a solution to the five-decades-old vexatious issue in two or three sittings. No follow-up action has been taken to resume talks for so long. Governments are receptive and react only when fishermen are killed or arrested in Sri Lankan waters,” says U. Arulanandam, Tamil Nadu’s representative of the Alliance for the Release of Innocent Fishermen, a long-time activist based in Pamban, Ramanathapuram.

While a section of fishermen in Pudukkottai and Ramanathapuram districts is for restarting talks, fisher leaders in Sri Lanka remain sceptical. “We are really pained by the recent death of Indian fishermen. We are all fishermen first, only then Indian or Sri Lankan. We fully understand their suffering, we are in solidarity with them and want to put an end to this,” says K. Rajachandran, who leads a fisher cooperative in Karainagar, a small island off the Jaffna peninsula.

At the same time, he calls for more sincerity in trying to come up with a solution. “I have been for several rounds of these talks. Despite many assurances to phase out trawlers, they continued coming in trawlers very close to our shore. If they agree to use small boats and traditional fishing methods, we are more than willing to come to the table to work out an arrangement to share our resources responsibly. That is the only way our future generations can live,” he says, insisting that stopping the use of trawlers be a pre-condition for future talks.

Also read | [Why are several T.N. fishermen in trouble with the Sri Lankan Navy?](#)

Unlike the state, fisher leaders do not talk in terms of invisible boundary lines in the sea, or the law that deems their fishing “illegal, unreported and unregulated”. They appear more inclined towards a humane and practical arrangement that will address their short-term concerns of

securing their livelihoods, as well as the long-term interest of preserving the marine organisms in the Palk Bay.

“The use of bottom trawlers has to be stopped fully. Northern fishermen here, whose livelihoods were devastated by a long-drawn civil war, are frustrated that despite their struggle over many years, the problem of bottom trawling by Tamil Nadu has not ended,” says Ahilan Kadirgamar, senior lecturer at the University of Jaffna, who researches fisherfolk’s livelihoods in Sri Lanka’s war-affected region. “There could be more rounds of talks and a promise of a permanent solution, but how can you really resolve this crisis without addressing the fundamental problem that is bottom trawling,” he asks.

Further, the Indian trawlers have spawned a fleet of relatively smaller, but still destructive trawlers in Jaffna, Rajachandran notes with concern. “We don’t oppose trawlers because they are from India. We oppose trawlers from Jaffna [there are some 500] as well. It is the destructive practice we are against, not the fishermen engaging in it.”

Comment | [Fishing in troubled waters](#)

Some others like Annalingam Annarasa, leader of the federation of fisher cooperative societies in Jaffna, want to give talks another chance. “Honestly, this is not an issue between two countries, or one between the Tamil Nadu fishermen and the Sri Lankan Navy. It is fundamentally an issue threatening the livelihoods of Tamil fishermen in both India and Sri Lanka. We need to work together with mutual understanding and solidarity,” says Annarasa. “We need to form an alliance with small-scale fishermen in Tamil Nadu and together raise awareness about the dire consequences of bottom trawling. That could be a starting point for talks.”

Meanwhile, a project of the Indian government, aimed at weaning Tamil Nadu fishermen off trawlers and diverting them to deep-sea fishing methods, took off in 2017, but has hardly progressed as planned. Both New Delhi and Tamil Nadu, implementing the 1,600 crore initiative, hoped to replace at least 2,000 trawlers with deep sea fishing boats with long lines and gill nets. However, [less than a tenth of that target has been achieved](#), *The Hindu* reported in December.

According to Johny Tom Varghese, Project Director Palk Bay and Additional Director (Fisheries) in Tamil Nadu, deep sea fishing will eventually be lucrative, though it is capital-intensive. “A fisherman who invests his money in a deep sea fishing boat can break even in about 18 months. We are training them. We have signed 103 agreements with individuals under the scheme,” he says.

Those grappling with the shift from trawlers to deep sea vessels are also confronted with rising costs. In Sesu Raja’s view, the 70% subsidy, together from the Centre and State, for the deep sea fishing boats, is insufficient. “The governments had worked out the cost at 80 lakh per boat, while it is almost 1.20 crore today,” he observes.

Pointing to the scheme’s “very slow progress,” Arulanandam says, “If it is implemented within a year or two, I hope it can offer a possible solution. But the governments should make sure of buying back all existing trawlers.”

The fishermen in Kottaiappattinam and Jagadapattinam villages in Pudukkottai too complain that while the government is taking steps to introduce deep sea fishing, the old boats are yet to be weeded out. The proposal to shift fishermen of Kottaiappattinam, Jagadapattinam and Rameswaram towards deep sea fishing has not picked up, fishermen say.

There have not been many takers for fish farming in the Gulf of Mannar, either. The hype following the successful demonstration of fish farming by the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute in Mandapam was short-lived. The Fisheries Department seized mechanised boats used for pair trawling on several occasions, but the punitive actions could not eliminate the practice fully. The deep divisions among various fishing groups and frequent agitations have put the brakes on enforcing strict regulations, according to fishermen.

As the campaign in election-bound Tamil Nadu picks up, the issues of fishermen, who constitute a sizeable electorate in coastal districts, will take centre stage again. “The real challenge for fishermen on both sides is to keep this issue in focus even after the polls,” says Annarasa, reflecting a similar sentiment heard in Tamil Nadu about “not allowing politicians to exploit our situation.”

At one level, the problem at hand is historical, complex and layered. At another, it is about sustaining and sharing finite marine resources in the Palk Strait, a narrow strip of water, just over 100 km at its widest, separating south India and northern Sri Lanka. As fishermen repeatedly point out, at the heart of this persisting conflict is their insecurity about their livelihoods and futures. Elections come and go, but that is yet to be decisively addressed.

This story is available exclusively to The Hindu subscribers only.

Already have an account ? [Sign in](#)

Start your 14 days free trial. [Sign Up](#)

Find mobile-friendly version of articles from the day's newspaper in one easy-to-read list.

Enjoy reading as many articles as you wish without any limitations.

A select list of articles that match your interests and tastes.

Move smoothly between articles as our pages load instantly.

A one-stop-shop for seeing the latest updates, and managing your preferences.

We brief you on the latest and most important developments, three times a day.

*Our Digital Subscription plans do not currently include the e-paper, crossword and print.

Dear reader,

We have been keeping you up-to-date with information on the developments in India and the world that have a bearing on our health and wellbeing, our lives and livelihoods, during these difficult times. To enable wide dissemination of news that is in public interest, we have increased the number of articles that can be read free, and extended free trial periods. However, we have a request for those who can afford to subscribe: please do. As we fight disinformation and misinformation, and keep apace with the happenings, we need to commit greater resources to news gathering operations. We promise to deliver quality journalism that stays away from vested interest and political propaganda.

Dear subscriber,

Thank you!

Your support for our journalism is invaluable. It's a support for truth and fairness in journalism. It has helped us keep pace with events and happenings.

The Hindu has always stood for journalism that is in the public interest. At this difficult time, it becomes even more important that we have access to information that has a bearing on our health and well-being, our lives, and livelihoods. As a subscriber, you are not only a beneficiary of our work but also its enabler.

We also reiterate here the promise that our team of reporters, copy editors, fact-checkers, designers, and photographers will deliver quality journalism that stays away from vested interest and political propaganda.

Suresh Nambath

Please enter a valid email address.

Video clip of Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple elephant communicating with mahout is a big hit

You can support quality journalism by turning off ad blocker or purchase a subscription for unlimited access to The Hindu.

[Sign up for a 30 day free trial.](#)

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

Crackin