



# NIAS Discussions

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES (NIAS)

Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bengaluru, 560012

## Are the Indian Fishermen 'Carefully Careless'? Fishing Conflicts In The Palk Bay

Report of NIAS Wednesday Discussion held on 29 June 2016

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### About NIAS Wednesday Discussions...

The NIAS faculty meets every Wednesday morning for academic discussions on various topics. As envisioned by Raja Rammanna, the Founder Director of NIAS, and pursued by his successors, the Wednesday meetings present the ongoing research, work-in-progress, and new/innovative ideas from the research studies of the faculty and the young researchers.

This Forum provides an excellent space to present one's work and also receive feedback and comments. Besides NIAS faculty and doctoral scholars others from outside the Institute also take part in these discussions.

Prof. Sangeetha Menon  
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coordinates these meetings.

The already troubled waters of the Palk Bay were further muddied with the arrest of eleven fishermen during the first week of June 2016 and confiscation of their trawlers by the Sri Lankan navy over illegal fishing. This contentious and flammable issue not only makes headlines in the local and foreign media, but also been a serious issue in Tamil Nadu. From time to time, it stirs the resentment of the fishermen folk and political parties in Tamil Nadu, leading to demonstrations and even violent protests. Above all, it often boils into a major political controversy with the national and state political parties blaming each other for the crisis besides bringing the government of Tamil Nadu directly against the Centre.

Although the fishermen arrests and political debates in the state have been continuing for many years, the big question is whether the underlying issues had been sidestepped and actually smouldered beneath the embers for years. Particularly, the following questions are pertinent:

- Why do Indian fishermen from Tamil Nadu cross



the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) despite these frequent arrests, assaults and confiscation of their fishing vessel by the Sri Lankan navy, again and again?

- Are they 'carefully careless' on the IMBL and the threat to their lives?
- Have the Tamil Nadu government and political parties intentionally ignore the legality of IMBL and sovereignty of Sri Lanka on Katchatheevu Island and their waters?
- Are the state and the centre disinclined to address and resolve this 'livelihood' issue that confront Tamil fishermen?

But the reality is that the closeness of International boundary line to the shores of both the countries, particularly about 7 km away from Dhanushkodi or 12 km away from



Rameswaram, means one entering into the other's territorial waters (12 nautical miles or 22 km) rather than one's own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). More importantly, the Palk Bay, is rich in biological diversity, beneficial nutrient content, salinity, and the muddy bedrock with seasonal rains. The water discharge from Vaigai and Cauvery rivers, has set the Bay as a good breeding ground for fishes - notably, with the abundance of shrimps, tuna, and prawn in the Palk Bay. This has high commercial value the fishermen from Tamil Nadu who take the risk of venturing into Sri Lankan waters. Growth of the trawler fleet in Tamil Nadu, particularly in Rameswaram has made it difficult for them to limit their activities only to the Indian waters where there is hardly any fishes. The survival of the fishermen from Rameswaram and its adjacent areas is depended on fishing in the Sri Lankan waters.

Ironically, except some who venture for the



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means of livelihoods, many are forced to cross the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) for quick economic gain. Lucrative offer from the sea export business houses that employs the fisherman in their enterprises and the drug and smuggling mafia have placed pressure to intentionally ignore the legality of the IMBL and the sovereignty of the Sri Lanka over its territorial waters.

The poaching of Tamil Nadu fishermen far inside the Sri Lankan waters has not only affected the livelihoods of Sri Lankan Tamil fishermen, but also affects foreign exchange earnings and security of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is one of the top international exporters of marine products is said to be losing about \$ 730 million worth of fish due to illegal poaching from Indian fishermen. As a result, the post-war Sri Lanka since 2010 has attempted various tactics to deter the Indian fishermen from Tamil Nadu from poaching in their waters. First, it employed strategy of assault and arrest and later some



instances of killing and then for last few years confiscation of the trawlers of poaching Tamil Nadu fishermen. Since, each fishing vessel is estimated to be around 25 lakhs, it is considered to have an effect on the fishing owners and the fishermen.

Unless, the Indian government, along with the Tamil Nadu government take any constructive steps, the livelihood issues of Tamil fisher folk in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka will continue to be



contentious and risky. Both government could take the following measures:

- educating and sensitising fishermen about the issues of crossing the IMBL
- facilitation of regular meeting of between fishermen of India and Sri Lanka
- banning of trawling and use of purse seine and minnow seine fishing nets, and decongestion of Rameswaram fishing trawler
- breaking the nexus between the politicians, businessmen and the fishermen

It is also time for the Tamil Nadu political parties and the fishermen to learn to respect legality of the 1974 agreement and international laws. Otherwise, the Palk Bay will continue to be the troubled water in the neighbourhood.

