India-Sri Lanka Fisheries Issue

Why in news?

After a gap of 15 months, the India-Sri Lanka Joint Working Group (JWG) on fisheries held its much-awaited deliberations in virtual format.

What is the history of the issue?

- One of the major reasons complicating the issue is of **Kachchatheevu Island**.
- India ceded the uninhabited island to Sri Lanka in 1974 under a conditional accord.
- In 1976, through an exchange of letter, both India and Sri Lanka agreed to stop fishing in each other's waters.
- In 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared Kachchatheevu Island as sacred land owing to a Catholic shrine's presence on the piece of land.
- The Central government of India, according to the 1974 accord, recognises Sri Lanka's sovereignty over Kachchatheevu.

What is the recent issue?

> *The State government has control up to 12 nautical miles (NM) from the base line, while the rest is vested with the Union government.*

- **Poaching in the territorial waters of Sri Lanka**- Recently, seven fishermen — five from Tamil Nadu and two from Sri Lanka have died in mid-sea clashes.
- As sections of fishermen from Tamil Nadu continue to transgress the International Maritime Boundary Line, cases of getting arrested and boats being impounded by the Sri Lankan authorities continue.
- The issue got aggravated when the impounded boats were auctioned despite a bilateral understanding on the matter.

Why is trawling a bone of contention between the two countries?

> *As per the Tamil Nadu Marine Fisheries Regulation Act, 1983, bottom trawling operations shall not be conducted within three nautical miles from the coast line.*

- Bottom trawling is a method of fishing that involves dragging heavy weighted nets across the sea floor, in an effort to catch fish.

- The use of mechanised bottom trawlers by Tamil Nadu fishermen is an issue not just between the two states but is seen as an adverse activity affecting the marine ecology.
- The actions of the Tamil Nadu fishermen adversely affect their counterparts in the Northern Province who are also struggling to come to terms with life after the civil war.
- At the same time, the fishermen of Tamil Nadu experience the lack of fishing areas (full of rocks and coral reefs besides being shallow) consequent to the demarcation of the IMBL in June 1974.
- Under the Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Act 1983, mechanised fishing boats can fish only beyond 3 NM from the coast pushing the fishermen to cross the IMBL frequently.

How can the issue be resolved?

- **Fisher-level talks**- The people of the two countries in general have common threads of language, culture and religion, all of which can be used purposefully to resolve any dispute.
- **Role of government**- The Tamil Nadu fishermen have to commit themselves to a swift transition to deep sea fishing or other alternative methods for which the government have to come forward as a guarantor.
- Whenever there is a genuine complaint about Tamil Nadu fishermen having damaged the properties of the counterparts, the Indian government can compensate this through proper channels.
- India's MoU with Sri Lanka for the development of fisheries harbours can be modified to include a scheme for deep sea fishing to the fishermen of the North.
- **R&D**- The JWG has agreed to have joint research on fisheries, which should be commissioned at the earliest.
- **Deep sea fishing**- India have to modify its scheme on deep sea fishing to accommodate the concerns of its fishermen so that they take to deep sea fishing without any reservation.
- The revised scheme has to absorb satisfactorily not only the unit cost of long liners but also the running cost.
- There is a need for the Central and State government to implement the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana proactively to covers alternative livelihood measures including seaweed cultivation, open sea cage cultivation, and sea ranching.
- **Institutional mechanisms**- The two countries should explore the possibility of establishing a permanent multi-stakeholder institutional mechanism to regulate fishing activity in the region.

References

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