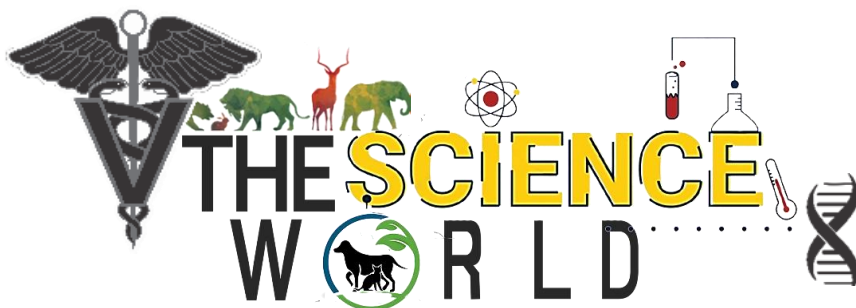




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Fisheries Conflicts in India: Causes, Consequences, and Pathways to Resolution

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Abstract

Fisheries conflicts in India are increasingly emerging from growing competition over declining fishery resources and access to shared aquatic ecosystems. This article examines the major ecological, social, economic, and political factors driving such conflicts. The Indo-Sri Lankan fisheries conflict in Palk Bay is also briefly discussed. The social, economic, and political consequences of these conflicts are discussed, along with strategies such as stakeholder collaboration, co-management, effective monitoring, sustainable fishing practices, alternative livelihoods, and bilateral cooperation. Strengthening inclusive and sustainable fisheries governance is essential for reducing conflicts and securing the livelihoods of fishing communities.

Introduction

India is endowed with diverse aquatic resources, including inland waters shared among states and marine waters bordering neighbouring countries. These fishery resources are accessed by multiple stakeholders with diverse interests, often leading to competition and conflict (Berkes, 1985). Fisheries are vital to India's economy, providing livelihoods, food and nutritional security, and foreign exchange. However, increasing mechanization, advanced fishing technologies, and fleet expansion have intensified fishing pressure and contributed to resource depletion. As fish catches decline and competition for limited resources increases, conflicts among artisanal and mechanized fishers, fishing communities, authorities, and between fishers from neighbouring countries have become increasingly common.



Causes of fisheries conflicts

1. Overfishing and resource depletion

Overfishing, driven by rising demand, population growth, and increasing fishing effort, depletes fish stocks. Mechanized vessels equipped with advanced fishing gear often encroach upon inshore fishing grounds traditionally accessed by artisanal fishers, resulting in increased competition for fishery resources and conflicts between the two sectors (Balakrishnan & Alagaraja, 1984).

2. Jurisdictional and territorial disputes

Jurisdictional and territorial disputes arise when fishers cross boundaries or compete for resources in shared waters between different states or countries. For instance, conflicts between Indian and Pakistani fishers and between Indian and Sri Lankan fishers often arise when fishers unintentionally or deliberately enter disputed or restricted waters, resulting in arrests, diplomatic tensions, and disputes between the respective countries (Gupta & Sharma, 2004; Manoharan & Deshpande, 2018).

3. Differences in fishing gear and scale of operations

Differences in fishing gear, fishing capacity, and the scale of operations can also contribute to conflicts. Large-scale fishing operations often use more efficient fishing gear and vessels with greater engine power, allowing them to harvest fish at a much higher rate than traditional fishers using relatively less efficient gear and smaller boats. The use of trawlers equipped with LED lights for fishing in coastal waters off Goa, for example, has been a source of contention between traditional fishing communities and large-scale trawler operators.

4. Illegal and unregulated fishing

Illegal and unregulated fishing practices, such as fishing in restricted areas, using prohibited fishing gear, harvesting banned species, and exceeding prescribed catch limits, can create tensions between law-abiding fishers and those engaged in illegal activities. Cross-border illegal fishing is another significant factor contributing to conflicts between fishing communities and neighbouring countries.

5. Policy and regulatory challenges

Conflicts often arise from inadequate recognition of traditional fishing rights, limited stakeholder consultation during policy formulation, and weak implementation and enforcement of fisheries regulations.



6. Environmental degradation and Climate Change

Changes in oceanographic conditions, shifting fish distributions, sea-level rise, and the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, all as a result of climate change, can disrupt traditional fishing practices and alter the availability of fishery resources. Pollution, habitat degradation, and the destruction of critical aquatic ecosystems further contribute to declining fish stocks. As resources become increasingly scarce, competition among stakeholders intensifies, potentially leading to disputes over fishing grounds and access to resources.

7. Lack of ecosystem knowledge

Limited understanding of ecological processes, stock dynamics, species diversity, and ecosystem functioning can contribute to unsustainable fishing practices and conflicts over declining catches.

A major case of fisheries conflict involving India: the Indo-Sri Lankan fisheries conflict

One of the most prominent fisheries conflicts involving India is the conflict between Indian and Sri Lankan fishers in the Palk Bay region, driven by competition over shared resources, differences in fishing practices, and the demarcation of the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL), which affected traditional fishing access on both sides. The expansion of bottom-trawl fishing by Indian fishers increased fishing pressure and resource depletion, leading some to cross into relatively less-exploited Sri Lankan waters and affecting the livelihoods of Sri Lankan fishers. During the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009), reduced fishing activity in Sri Lankan waters further facilitated such incursions. Following the war, increased fishing activity, intensive bottom trawling, and nighttime fishing by Indian fishers intensified competition and damaged the gear of Sri Lankan artisanal fishers. The conflict has resulted in the detention of fishers and significant social, economic, and political tensions between the two countries (Amaralal et al., 2021). Measures such as restrictions on mechanized fishing vessels, bilateral negotiations, alternative livelihood programmes, and promotion of deep-sea fishing have been undertaken (Manoharan & Deshpande, 2018; High Commission of India, Colombo, 2015), but a long-term mutually acceptable solution remains elusive.

Consequences

Fisheries conflicts can have serious ecological, social, economic, and political consequences.



1. Loss of livelihoods and economic insecurity

Fisheries conflicts can disrupt livelihoods, resulting in unemployment and significant financial losses for individuals and families dependent on fishing. Prolonged disputes among fishing communities may compel fishers to increase their fishing effort to maintain household incomes.

2. Threats to human security

Fisheries conflicts can create serious security concerns, including arrests, detention, imprisonment, physical attacks, and, in extreme cases, loss of life.

3. Political instability and strained bilateral relations

Disputes over access to fishing grounds and cross-border fishing activities can escalate into diplomatic tensions, deepen mistrust, and hinder bilateral cooperation. At the domestic level, conflicts between states over shared fishery resources may also result in political disagreements, protests, and governance challenges.

Strategies to resolve

Resolving the multifaceted fisheries conflicts in India requires a combination of short- and long-term measures addressing ecological, economic, social, and political dimensions. Active participation of all relevant stakeholders in fisheries management, along with co-management and shared decision-making, can promote collective responsibility for resource management. Strict vessel licensing, fleet-size control, and ecosystem-based management are also essential for sustainable use of shared marine resources. Strengthening Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance (MCS) systems, maintaining accurate vessel registries, and ensuring systematic use of logbooks can help control illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, regulate fishing effort, and improve compliance with fisheries regulations. The adoption of selective fishing gear, establishment of protected areas, and other spatial management measures can reduce juvenile and non-target catches, conserve critical habitats, and support fish stock recovery. Promoting alternative livelihoods such as aquaculture, eco-tourism, seafood processing, and other allied activities can reduce dependence on overexploited fishery resources. For transboundary conflicts, effective negotiations and bilateral agreements are essential to clarify fishing access rights, coordinate conservation measures, and reduce tensions over cross-border fishing. Finally, awareness programmes, education, and continuous dialogue among fishing communities can promote sustainable resource use, address



misunderstandings, build trust, and foster cooperation, thereby contributing to long-term conflict resolution and sustainable fisheries management.

Conclusion

Fisheries conflicts in India are the result of a complex interplay of environmental, economic, social, and political factors and may intensify due to climate change, population growth, rising resource demand, and declining fish stocks. Addressing these conflicts requires sustainable fisheries management, effective governance and enforcement, stakeholder participation, equitable resource sharing, alternative livelihoods, and dialogue among competing user groups to safeguard both fishing communities and aquatic ecosystems.

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