

Red lines bleed crimson tears

When Rameswaram's boats don't return, the only certainty for fisherwomen and coastal households is prolonged vulnerability

By **Monishree K.**
(monishree.fex.mb408@cife.edu.in), M.F.Sc
Scholar and **Ananthan P. S.**
(ananthan@cife.edu.in), Principal Scientist,
ICAR-Central Institute of
Fisheries Education, India

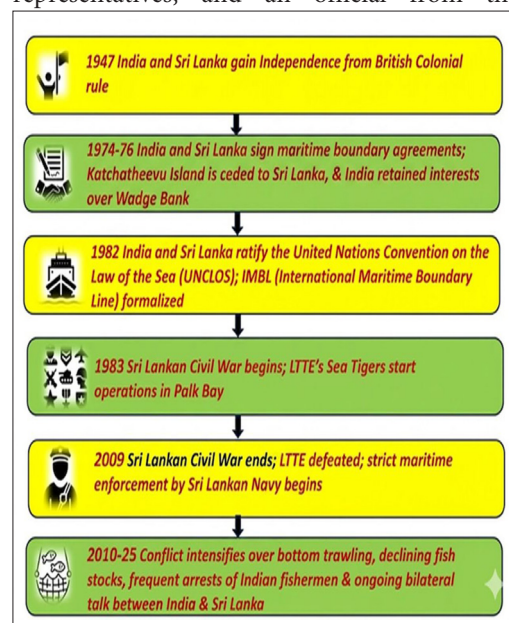
Rameswaram, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, straddles the threshold of land and belief, known for its rich cultural heritage, sacred geography, and long shoreline. Pilgrims arrive for rituals and prayers, but for those who live here, the sea (and fishing) is the backbone of the local economy – and, for most coastal households, the only source of livelihood. Daily life unfolds around the rhythm of boats going out and returning, catches being sold, and the flow of just enough income to sustain families. Women play a central role in sustaining this rhythm, they manage households, prepare meals, send children to school, mend nets, care for elders, and organize family life around the uncertainties of fishing. Their work is continuous, though rarely recognised, and deeply tied to the assumption that the boats, and the men on them, will return.

These assumptions break the moment when news arrives of their men having been arrested for crossing a line. A line? Yes, a red one, though not drawn by ink. One might be inclined to term this a 'line in the sand', if it were not stretched out across the sea. No, this line is invisible, a marker of bounds sketched by policy, dating back to the declaration of the International Maritime Boundary Line in 1974 that formally reinforced the spatial separation of water between India and Sri Lanka, and the subsequent Indo-Sri Lankan fishing agreements. Following the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982, the line grew starker, and redder, still as it became embedded within a series of policy and developmental milestones. By contrast, the decades-long fisheries conflict that brewed along its margins has been shrouded in shades of grey.

Their impacts, however, are less uncertain. Since 2011, there have been 402 reported incidents, over which 4,921 Indian fishermen were arrested, and 832 boats were seized. Although most detained fishermen were subsequently released through diplomatic interventions, as of 7 January 2025, nearly 96 fishermen remained in detention in Sri Lanka and 251 seized boats remain confiscated. Over its run, the conflict has settled into a familiar pattern: arrests continue, fishers protest and media debates intensify, following which

diplomatic negotiations ensue. Beyond these visible narratives, however, lies a less-seen story, one that plays out not on the water, but inside homes. The arrests happen at sea, but their consequences wash ashore. For families, whose daily, predictable rhythms of life collapse without warning. This study hopes to shed light on this upheaval, examining the lived realities for households in fishing communities after the men are arrested. Its goal is not to debate the legality or morality of crossing maritime boundaries by fishers. Instead, it looks at the aftermath, exploring the specific layers of distress and instability faced by the women impacted by the arrests, as well as the practical strategies they develop to keep their households running while living in a state of prolonged vulnerability.

To document these experiences, in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 women directly affected by these arrests, including women whose husbands (as was the case for three women) and sons (the case for two women) were still in detention at the time, as well as nine women whose family members had been released. To provide a broader community perspective, additional interviews were held with an experienced fisherman, local women's representatives, and an official from the



Key milestones in the Indo-Sri Lankan transboundary fisheries conflict



Training provided to fisherwomen for alternative livelihood activities under the Tamil Nadu state government's Kaniyam scheme

Department of Fisheries. The following sections highlight the struggles, coping strategies, and resilience of these women.

Economic distress: The financial collapse of the household

Income disappears overnight, but expenses refuse to wait. As expressed by many women, economic struggles are deepened: as food must be arranged, school fees somehow managed, and household rent and loan instalments must be paid on time. Managing even two meals a day, while comforting children amidst growing uncertainty, becomes an everyday challenge. The financial impact of an arrest extends far beyond the immediate loss of income. Many women reported that their inability to make timely payments damaged their standing within informal lending circles. This loss of “financial credibility” is a long-term burden, one that persists even after a husband or son returns, with affected women finding it difficult to regain the trust of lenders. This creates a secondary crisis, as they are often denied the credit needed to handle future family emergencies or to get back to work.

Psychological distress and the burden of waiting

The sudden economic disruption is accompanied by mounting psychological distress. Minisha, a 27-year-old from Rameswaram, expressed the exhaustion felt by many: “There were moments when I felt like ending my life. Once my husband is released, we will struggle on land, take up any work we find, even beg if needed, but we don’t want to go back to the sea again.” The psychological strain on these women is a direct result of living in a state of “unlimited waiting”. Without clear

updates on legal proceedings or release dates, many women described a state of persistent anxiety where days and weeks passed without any reliable information. The distress grew heavier with the children’s repeated question: “When will Appa come back?”. Over time, this emotional pressure begins to affect their physical health. Many women mentioned symptoms like chronic sleep disruption, persistent physical exhaustion, and loss of appetite.

Social stigma and community pressure

For these women, the distress of an arrest is not only confined to the home, it also follows them into public spaces. Daily interactions with neighbours often revolve around intrusive questioning regarding the detention and legal status of their family members. While these inquiries are frequently presented as sympathetic, they force women to repeatedly confront and explain their situation, resulting in significant emotional exhaustion rather than comfort. As described by one fisherwoman, a simple trip that used to take 30 minutes now takes an hour and a half, as she is constantly stopped by people asking for updates or expressing unsolicited sympathy. Such social interrogations also extend to children, who often face uncomfortable questioning at school, with the scrutiny leading to embarrassment and silent coping among youngsters too.

Navigating safety and security in the absence of men

Many women disheartenedly conveyed that safety became a daily worry. “Without a man in the house, nights become frightening. Sometimes, drunkards knock on our doors, and

During these moments of prolonged uncertainty and recovery, it is the quiet labour of women that holds lives together. Their victories, strength and agency are neither heralded, nor celebrated, and yet they sustain families, safeguard dignity, and carry communities forward

we sit awake, anxious, not knowing what might happen. This is not just my story; many women here are going through the same thing, quietly,” said Loila Teresa, who lives in Rameswaram with her two daughters.

Fishermen similarly expressed the emotional burden of worrying about their family’s safety while in detention. One fisherman reflected, “We struggled a lot in that jail, but thinking about my wife and children alone at home was heavier than everything else.”

Choice and agency in coping strategies

Despite these constraints, the women stood strong, because they had to. They started acting “as him”, they did not remain passive, they responded through continuous, adaptive effort. As one fisherwoman shared, “Even if my husband is arrested, I have to be strong enough to manage everything; if I break down, there will be no one to hold my family together.”

While the burden on these women was immense, they didn’t have to carry it entirely alone. Survival during these months of uncertainty depended on a mixture of support from the local community and official government aid. The government provides a daily relief payment of about Rs 500 to help families cover basic needs. Living in joint families became a practical advantage, as relatives shared food, looked after children, and helped with money. Many women also turned to their parents (their natal families) for financial help or groceries, especially in the first few days after an arrest. When a crisis hit, it was often neighbours who stepped in with small loans or helped with errands and childcare. These personal connections served as a daily safety net that kept households functioning when there was no income coming in.

Managing finances was only one part of survival: to cope with psychological stress and social scrutiny, women relied on their own everyday strategies. Many women took up informal livelihood activities such as net-mending and shell handicraft-making, which not only generate income but also help keep them engaged, providing relief from distressing thoughts. Many women consciously suppress their own emotions in public, believing that strength must be maintained so the household does not fall apart. For many of these women, the presence of their children changed the way they viewed their struggle. Instead of just being another source of worry, their sons and daughters became the primary reason to keep going. The need to provide stability for the children acted as a powerful motivator, pushing them to find work and manage the home even when they felt completely depleted.

At the same time, there was a quiet, firm resolve to protect the family’s reputation. Despite the gossip and the weight of the social

stigma following the arrests, these women made a conscious choice to carry themselves with dignity. They didn’t see themselves as victims to be pitied; they saw themselves as the anchors of their families. A powerful example of this “self-raising” can be seen from the story of Mrs. Suganthi, a fisherwoman who pivoted her challenging situation into a platform for leadership. After gaining mastery in the art of shell handicrafts through training provided by the Tamil Nadu Government, she not only secured her own income, but also became a beacon of hope for her whole community. Today, she has trained more than 500 women in the craft, providing them with a sustainable livelihood that exists independent of the sea’s vagaries.

Over time, collective responses also emerged, with women participating in protests demanding improved relief and compensation during periods when men were under arrest. These efforts led to some improvements in assistance schemes, including an increase in the daily relief amount. However, despite these measures, many households continue to struggle for survival. “We are witnessing their struggle every day. Even though we do not yet know what the long-term solution could be,” said the state fisheries officer at Rameswaram.

Interestingly, many women express empathy toward Sri Lankan fishers as well, recognising shared dependence on dwindling marine resources and similar livelihood pressures. In some households, arrest experiences have led to greater sharing of economic responsibilities, with women taking on more active income-generating roles to reduce future vulnerability.

The boats eventually return and activity at sea begins again, but the debt and emotional strain remain ingrained on the shore. Even when the fishing resumes, the consequences of arrest continue to shape everyday life within households. During these moments of prolonged uncertainty and recovery, it is the quiet labour of women that holds lives together. Their victories, strength and agency are neither heralded, nor celebrated, and yet they sustain families, safeguard dignity, and carry communities forward. Still, beneath the surface waters of these daily survival struggles, some unanswered questions rise like a tide: are these women victims of a man-made crisis? In the din of political discourse dominated by men, will their voices be heard? And will their hopes be answered? ■

Additional Readings: *Support to resolving the transboundary fisheries problem between India and Sri Lanka: A report by R. Manimohan*

Resolving transboundary fishing conflicts in the Palk Bay: Report of a panel discussion prepared by Siddharth Premkumar; 2025

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