

From Shore to Plate: Why Domestic Seafood Consumption Matters More Than Ever

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The Indian Seafood Paradox

India's relationship with seafood is centuries old. With a coastline of over 7,500 kilometres, countless rivers, lakes, and ponds, the sea has always been more than a geographical feature. It has been a provider of food, culture, and livelihoods. Fishing villages and bustling harbours tell stories of dawn markets, steaming pots of fish curry, and nets heavy with the day's catch. Yet, despite this abundance, India faces a paradox. We are one of the largest seafood producers and exporters in the world, but our domestic consumption remains surprisingly low. Much of our catch travels thousands of kilometres to Europe, North America, and East Asia, while our own households often treat seafood as an occasional delicacy rather than a regular staple.

To put numbers behind this paradox: the total fish production in India during FY 2023-24 was about 18.40 million metric tonnes (MMT), with the inland sector contributing ~13.91 MMT and the marine (including capture and marine aquaculture) ~4.49 MMT. Despite this high production, per capita consumption has been modest. In 2021, India's per capita annual fish consumption was approximately 8.89 kg per person, up from around 4.9 kg in 2005. Among only those who eat fish, the figure is higher (around 12.33 kg/year), but large parts of the population either consume very little fish or none.

Seafood as Nature's Superfood

Few foods offer as rich a nutrient profile as fish. Apart from high-quality protein, essential amino acids, and healthy fats, fish delivers micronutrients often lacking in many Indian diets. Considering rising health challenges such as diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and childhood malnutrition, seafood holds tremendous promise. The increased awareness of these benefits in recent years is reflected in rising demand for fish in diets. Though precise state-wise health outcome statistics directly tied to rising fish consumption are limited, national nutrition

surveys show that regions with higher fish intake tend to have better protein and micronutrient status among women and children.

Economic Ripple Effects

Every time a fish is sold in a domestic market, it sustains far more than one livelihood. The fisheries sector in India supports over 2.8 crore fishers and fish farmers at the primary level, plus many more along the value chain. Within this total, about 23.1 million are engaged in inland fisheries and around 4.9 million in marine fisheries. This huge workforce is vulnerable to fluctuations in demand and export pressures.

INDIA VS. JAPAN VS. CHINA PER CAPITA FISH CONSUMPTION

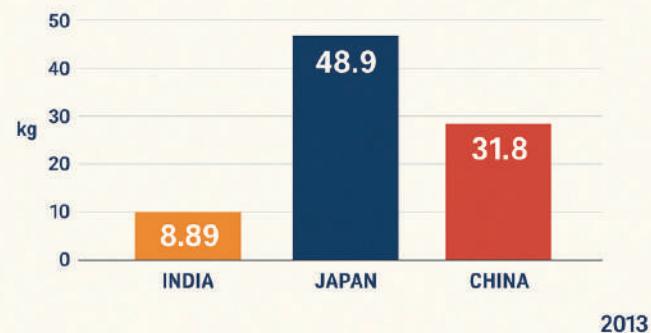


Figure 1: The infographics of per capita fish consumption.

In terms of production growth, fish production has more than doubled over the past couple of decades. For example, in 2005-06, annual fish production was about 5.66 MMT. By 2023-24, it reached 18.40 MMT. The sector's annual average growth in recent years has been around 6.30%. Andhra Pradesh is the leading state in the fishing and aquaculture sector, holding about 40.9% share of India's total fishing & aquaculture output. The value of output in that sector rose from around ₹80,000 crore in 2011-12 to about ₹1,95,000 crore in 2022-23. The domestic consumption of fish has increased too: from about 5.428 million tonnes in 2005 to nearly 11.924 million tonnes in more recent years, indicating over 100%

growth in tonnage consumed domestically.

Cultural Heritage on the Plate

Seafood is more than nutrition, it is memory and identity. Each region of India has its signature fish dishes: Bengal's prized hilsa, Kerala's meen curry, Andhra Pradesh's spicy prawn masala, Goa's aromatic fish thali, and Tamil Nadu's soulful meen kuzhambu. These dishes carry centuries of tradition, shaping festivals, rituals, and everyday meals. In many communities, fish is not just food but a symbol of prosperity and continuity.

Even culturally, statistics show strong participation by women: in the marine sector, about 47% of the marine fisherfolk (people involved in marine fishing) are women; in inland fisheries, about 44% are women. Most women are involved in post-harvest activities cleaning, curing, processing, marketing etc. These roles are essential for preserving and passing on local fishing/cooking traditions.

Sustainability and the Blue Future

India's aquaculture market is growing rapidly, partly driven by the need for sustainable food sources. In 2024, the aquaculture market size in India was 14.4 million tons, and it is projected to reach 28.8 million tons by 2033, showing a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of about 7.57% during 2025-2033. In the national fish production figures of FY 2023-24, the inland sector (aquaculture & inland fisheries) contributed ~13.91 MMT, constituting a large share of the total 18.40 MMT. Export figures also illustrate the scale of operations: seafood exports in FY 2023-24 were about 1.78 million tonnes, valued at approximately INR 60,523.89 crore (around USD 7.38 billion). Shrimp, particularly *Penaeus vannamei*, dominates in terms of value.

Barriers That Hold Us Back

Statistical data helps highlight how far India has come, but also what obstacles remain. For example, though per capita fish consumption rose from ~4.9 kg in 2005 to ~8.89 kg in 2021, that's still far below many Asian countries. In 2013, India's per capita consumption was ~6.1 kg, while in the same year China had ~38 kg, Indonesia ~31.8 kg, and Japan ~48.9 kg. Figure 1 shows the infographics of per capita fish consumption.

Another barrier is infrastructure: though exact numbers

vary by region, many fisherfolk operate without adequate cold storage or hygienic handling, which limits the reach and desirability of seafood in inland markets. Also, price volatility: for example, a shift from shrimp farming to murrel fish in Andhra Pradesh was attempted after losses in shrimp, but oversupply caused prices for murrel to drop sharply, hurting farmers again.

The Way Forward

The statistics make the case: India is producing more, consuming more domestically, and employing millions via fisheries & aquaculture. But large gaps remain in per capita consumption, infrastructure, affordability, and cultural acceptance in non-coastal regions.

Policy initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY), schemes under the "Blue Revolution", investments in cold chains, better market infrastructure, and traceability can amplify the gains. Encouraging domestic consumption through public institutions (schools, hospitals) and awareness campaigns can help shift dietary norms.

Brands and communities can set targets: for example, raising national per capita fish consumption to 15-20 kg, or ensuring that every coastal household access affordable clean fish at least twice a week. Regions like Andhra Pradesh, with 40.9% share in the sector and strong growth in value of output, can serve as role models.

Conclusion: Bringing the Catch Home

The numbers are persuasive. India now produces over 18 million tonnes of fish annually; millions depend on this sector; domestic consumption has more than doubled in tonnage over two decades; aquaculture markets are growing at ~7-8% annually; Andhra Pradesh alone contributes nearly ₹2 lakh crore worth of output. Yet per-person consumption is still well below many of our neighbours.

If Indians collectively decide to bring seafood back onto everyday plates, the benefits multiply: healthier diets, stronger rural economies, preserved cultural heritage, and a more sustainable future for our water bodies. Seafood is not just export material, it is national treasure. From shore to plate, the journey awaits. Let's make every meal count.