

HIDDEN HARVEST

Human Rights and Environmental Abuses in
India's Shrimp Industry



Executive Summary

Over the past decade, India has emerged as the United States' leading source of shrimp, the most consumed seafood in the country. However, this success is marred by a production process that relies on forced labor, dangerous and abusive working conditions, and environmental destruction to meet demands for ever-lower prices. While countries like Thailand, China, and Bangladesh have faced criticism for similar abuses, India, which supplies almost 40 percent of U.S. shrimp imports, has remained under the radar with little public scrutiny – until now.

This extensive, multi-year investigation exposes pervasive systemic abuses throughout the Indian shrimp supply chain, from hatcheries to shrimp farms to processing facilities. Standard practices include exploiting vulnerable lower caste and migrant populations to work under dangerous conditions, constraining worker movements through guarded company housing, fostering debt bondage, destroying essential mangrove and wetland habitats, and polluting community water supplies. That reality shapes the lives of countless workers, undermines their health and safety, and eviscerates their physical environment, all to serve the interests of those who seek to promote sales at the other end of the supply chain. Meanwhile, the Indian government has failed to take effective action to address these violations of its labor, health and safety, and environmental laws – as well as numerous international conventions.

1. For the past decade, India has been the leading exporter of shrimp to the United States.

A significant trade shift began in 2009 when Indian shrimp producers gained permission to import *L. vannamei* (whiteleg) shrimp broodstock, the primary type of farmed shrimp consumed in the United States and globally. By 2013, India overtook Thailand to become the largest exporter of shrimp to the United States. Indian shrimp production, centered in Andhra Pradesh and the east coast of India, proliferated as the Thai shrimp industry struggled with shrimp disease and repeated findings of forced labor. When Thai labor practices improved and helped to drive up prices for Thai shrimp, U.S. importers quickly shifted to Indian shrimp due to its lower prices and abundant supply. During this period, the Indian shrimp industry's market share in the United States continued to expand, reaching 40 percent of all shrimp imports in 2023.

2. Employers in the shrimp industry exploit vulnerable workers across the supply chain.

The Indian shrimp workforce is primarily composed of workers from Dalit, Adivasi, and fisher communities, many of whom are internal migrants and from regions with few employment options. Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation because they are far from home, may lack social networks, and often have few other job opportunities. Through recruiters, companies prey on the vulnerability of those needing work. Recruitment loans tie workers to jobs, keeping them in debt bondage. Most workers in the Indian shrimp industry lack contracts with their employers, resulting in job insecurity and the absence of a formal connection to companies. These hidden, informal workers are at high risk for forced labor – especially those whose housing is tied to their employment, a common practice across the supply chain. Workers report an exploitative relationship with employers and feeling trapped in abusive jobs with few alternative means to earn a living. Child labor is also prevalent, with young teenage girls working in processing facilities to help support their families.

3. Forced labor and dangerous and abusive conditions are common in the Indian shrimp sector.

Under international standards, forced labor occurs where work is conducted “under the menace of penalty” and is not voluntary, as occurs when Indian shrimp workers are held in debt bondage or restricted to guarded company property through housing. In addition, dangerous working conditions exist throughout the supply chain. For example, workers on shrimp farms handle hazardous chemicals without appropriate protective gear, leading to injuries. Workers in the processing sector endure frostbite and rashes from prolonged contact with frozen shrimp, chemicals, and brine – a problem exacerbated by the inability to take time off work to allow their injuries to heal. Working hours in the shrimp supply chain are also excessively long; in hatcheries and shrimp farms, workers report working more than twelve hours a day. In the processing sector, workers live in overcrowded and often unsanitary conditions under the careful surveillance of company guards. They are rarely allowed to leave the premises, sometimes as infrequently as once a month. When they do leave with express permission, it is for a limited time, often just a few hours. Workers, especially in the processing sector, describe excessive verbal abuse, and women experience gender discrimination and harassment. Workers report feeling intimidated and threatened, fearing retaliation if they speak to anyone outside the company.

4. The shrimp industry threatens nearby ecosystems, contaminates groundwater, and contributes to a decrease in fish yields.

Shrimp production in India is causing severe environmental damage and impeding the sustainability of other industries near shrimp production facilities, including agriculture and fishing. Hatcheries and shrimp farms are often built along the coastline, sometimes replacing or harming mangroves, wetlands, and agricultural areas. This destruction of mangroves harms wild species that flourish within them, including juvenile fish, and makes the area more susceptible to major weather events. Hatcheries and shrimp farms also release sewage into the ocean and other waterways, polluting coastal waters and contributing to decreased fish yields, making it increasingly difficult for traditional fisher communities to earn a living. Discharged water from hatcheries and shrimp farms can contain contaminants from shrimp waste, feed, antibiotics, and other pollutants that are released into groundwater or other coastal estuaries, contaminating communities’ groundwater and causing health problems.

5. A lack of governmental oversight enables human rights and environmental abuses in the sector.

The Indian and Andhra Pradesh governments have generally left the shrimp industry to monitor itself, with little enforcement of the relevant labor and environmental laws. Private certification schemes have emerged in the absence of government action. The farmed shrimp sector is primarily covered by two certification schemes: Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) and Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC). These certification schemes purport to ensure that the farmed shrimp sold with their verification marks were ethically produced – meaning the producers complied with labor laws and that environmental impacts were minimized. While the standards in these voluntary industry programs are laudable, they are regularly violated, including in certified facilities. BAP and ASC function, as a practical matter, as little more than marketing ploys that fail to protect workers or the environment. The lack of regulation in the shrimp sector allows companies to slough off the costs of production onto vulnerable individuals and local communities who must deal with the contaminated water, ravaged mangroves, and polluted agricultural land.

The shrimp industry in India is at a crossroads. It is time that U.S. supermarkets, restaurants, and wholesalers – the big buyers of Indian-produced shrimp – work with producing companies to improve the working conditions and clean up the environmental harms associated with this industry. Indian shrimp producers must comply with Indian labor and environmental laws and international conventions, respect their workers, and allow them to work and live with dignity. The Indian government must monitor the shrimp sector, enforcing existing laws and passing stronger regulations – while the U.S. government must regulate shrimp imports to ensure all legal requirements are met. Shrimp produced with forced labor has no place competing in the U.S. market.

The conditions found in the Indian shrimp sector are not inevitable but instead result from cost-cutting and downward pricing pressure by U.S. supermarkets, restaurants, and wholesalers that “squeeze” producers to provide ever-cheaper shrimp. Human rights and environmental protections are non-negotiable in corporate governance. It is time to prioritize the well-being and dignity of workers and the environment over profit-making from America’s favorite seafood.