

Hygienic Dry Fish: Quality on the Shore, Silence in the Market

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ABSTRACT

India is among the leading producers of dry fish globally, yet the fishing communities that produce it remain among the most economically undervalued workers in the food system. This article draws from direct field observations among dry fish producer communities along the Odisha coast, where a compelling paradox was witnessed — producers who have willingly adopted improved hygienic practices in dry fish preparation continue to receive the same low market price as those using traditional methods. The improved practices include elevated drying racks, insect-proof netting, clean water washing, proper salt management, and food-grade packaging. Despite this visible quality difference, the absence of consumer awareness, inadequate retail penetration, and limited market linkages prevent producers from earning a price premium for their efforts. The situation is further compounded by the selectively non-vegetarian food culture prevalent in Odisha, which makes mainstream retailers and supermarkets reluctant to stock dry fish prominently. As a result, hygienic dry fish reaches consumers only through select local shops, government exhibitions, and direct-sale events — channels too limited to sustain livelihoods or drive lasting market change. This article argues that bridging the awareness gap between producers and consumers, through labeling, certification, market linkages, and community storytelling, is essential to making quality dry fish production economically rewarding and sustainable.

“We do everything right — we wash the fish, we use nets, we keep it clean. But at the end of the day, the buyer gives us the same money as before.”

— A dry fish producer, Odisha coast (Personal communication, 2024)

INTRODUCTION

This simple statement, heard during a field visit to a coastal fishing community, captures a deep and troubling paradox at the heart of India’s dry fish sector.

During my field visits to fishing communities along the Odisha coast, I witnessed something that stayed with me long after I left — women and men carefully arranging fish on elevated racks, covering them with nets to keep flies away, washing them in clean water before drying. They had learned better methods. They were practicing them. Yet when they took their carefully prepared dry fish to the market, they received the same price as everyone else.

*The challenge, I realized, runs deeper than just pricing. Odisha, despite being a coastal state with a rich fish-eating tradition, has a population that is **selectively non-vegetarian** — many households consume fish only on certain days or occasions, and this cultural pattern quietly shapes the marketplace. Mainstream supermarkets and mall retailers are often **reluctant to stock dry fish products** prominently, wary of odour concerns, shelf presentation, and mixed customer preferences. As a result, hygienic dry fish rarely reaches the urban consumer who might actually be willing to pay more for quality.*

*Instead, these products find their way to buyers only through **select local shops, government exhibitions, and occasional direct-sale events** — limited windows that cannot sustain a producer’s income or build lasting consumer awareness. That gap — between the effort invested in quality and the reach needed to reward it — is what inspired me to write this article.¹*

Traditional vs. Hygienic Dry Fish Preparation: What Has Changed?

Traditionally, dry fish preparation involved open-air sun drying on bare ground or rocks, with little protection from dust, insects, and contamination. While this method has been practiced for generations, it carries significant food safety concerns — microbial contamination, aflatoxin risk, and poor shelf life.

Over recent years, exposure to training programs, government schemes, and NGO interventions has introduced producer communities to improved hygienic practices, including:

- Elevated drying racks to prevent ground contact
- Insect-proof netting covers to reduce fly infestation
- Salt quality management for controlled curing
- Clean water washing before drying
- Proper packaging using food-grade materials
- Shade-net or solar dryer systems for weather-protected drying

These are not complicated or unaffordable changes. What is striking is that when demonstrated and explained, **fishing communities have shown genuine willingness to adopt these methods.** They understand the value of cleaner fish. They take pride in producing a better product.²

The Ground Reality: Quality Produced, Value Lost

Here lies the paradox.

Despite producing hygienically superior dry fish, producers in many regions continue to receive the **same low market price** as those using traditional, unhygienic methods. There is no visible price premium for quality. No label that says “hygienically prepared.” No consumer asking, “How was this dried?”

The result? Economically rational producers quietly abandon the extra effort. Why invest more time, labor, and care when the market treats all dry fish the same? This is not a failure of the fishing community. This is a **failure of the value chain** — specifically, a failure of consumer awareness.¹

The Missing Link: Consumer Awareness

In most urban and semi-urban markets, consumers purchase dry fish based on appearance, smell, and price — but rarely on preparation method or hygiene standards. There is little to no public discourse on what constitutes hygienically prepared dry fish, how to identify contamination or poor-quality products, or why paying a slightly higher price for quality dry fish matters — for their health and for the producer’s livelihood.

This awareness gap has real consequences. It suppresses demand for quality, discourages producers from sustaining improved practices, and perpetuates a race to the bottom on price.³

What Needs to Happen

Bridging this gap requires action at multiple levels:

- 1. Consumer Education Campaigns:** Government agencies, fisheries departments, and NGOs must invest in public awareness drives — at markets, through media, and via social platforms —

explaining the difference between hygienically and traditionally prepared dry fish.

- 2. Labeling and Certification:** Introducing simple quality labels or certification marks for hygienically produced dry fish can help consumers make informed choices and give producers a visible market identity.⁴
- 3. Market Linkages:** Connecting certified hygienic dry fish producers directly with urban retailers, supermarkets, and online platforms can help them access consumers who are willing to pay for quality.
- 4. Community Storytelling:** The story of a fisher woman carefully washing fish, setting up drying racks, and packaging her product cleanly is a powerful narrative. Sharing these stories through digital media can build both consumer trust and producer pride.

CONCLUSION

The producers are ready. The knowledge is available. The technology is simple. What remains missing is the **consumer connection** — the awareness that turns effort into income and quality into reward.

Dry fish is too important — nutritionally, economically, and culturally — to remain trapped in a low-value, low-visibility corner of our food system. It is time we told this story better: from the hands that dry it, to the plates that need it.

The sea gives generously. Let us ensure the people who harvest and preserve its gifts are rewarded generously too.

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Note: *All field data, observations, and community interactions cited in this article are based on the author's own compilation from professional field extension work conducted between 2011 and 2025. Where published sources are referenced, they are acknowledged above.*