

AP finds grueling conditions in Indian shrimp industry that report calls 'dangerous and abusive'

MARTHA MENDOZA, MAHESH KUMAR and PIYUSH NAGPAL

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AP From India, the shrimp travels by the ton, frozen in shipping containers, to the U.S., more than 8,000 miles away. It is nearly impossible to tell where a specific shrimp ends up, and whether a U.S.-bound shipment has a connection to abusive labor practices.



That is simply not the case. There are stringent regulatory processes in both India and the United States that monitor and oversee that supply chain from start to finish.

AP Pradeep Sivaraman, secretary of India's Marine Products Export Development Authority, a government agency, traveled to the U.S. this month to represent his country's shrimp industry on the bustling floor of the Seafood Expo North America in Boston. A chef at India's booth sauteed a sizzling shrimp curry in front of a case filled with frozen shrimp.

Before ending a brief interview, Sivaraman said India is committed to providing quality shrimp to U.S. buyers. He refused to answer questions about labor and environmental problems.

AP reporters accosted Indian shrimp industry representatives without warning, presented vague accusations, many of which were later shown to be false or mistaken, and provided no context or substantiation, and yet fault the people they assailed for recognizing the inappropriateness of those tactics.

AP Many people in India struggle to survive amid endemic poverty, debt and unemployment. The women AP spoke with said this work, despite the oppressive conditions, is their only chance to avoid starvation. The economic drivers go beyond shrimp, and beyond India, to issues of globalization and Western power.

AP The tragic irony is that articles like this, filled with errors and omissions, leave readers with a distorted view of Indian shrimp exporters that will cause harm to the very workers AP claims to be concerned with, potentially setting back economic development in the region by years.

AP Desperately poor women told AP they weren't paid overtime as mandated by law, in addition to not being paid India's minimum wage. Some said they were locked inside guarded hostels when they weren't peeling shrimp. The work was unsanitary to the point that workers' hands were infected, and they lacked safety and hygiene protection required under Indian law. And it doesn't meet U.S. legal food safety standards required for all seafood imports.

AP reporters repeated these accusations to some of our members' customers. Yet they have provided no hard evidence of any of them, either to SEAI or any of our member companies. That makes it impossible for us to assess the truth of any of these claims. Moreover, throughout the story AP conflates the exporters we represent with other businesses that operate only in India's domestic market. So it's not even clear that the anonymous sources cited here even work for any exporter.

AP The Corporate Accountability Lab said American importers may never encounter desperate and abused shrimp peelers, because large Indian exporters invite auditors into their own state-of-the-art facilities and use them as a "showcase to foreign buyers."

In contrast, "auditors are unlikely to audit peeling sheds," the report said.

AP This is a knowingly deceptive description that makes it sound as if the same companies are operating the "state-of-the-art facilities" and the "peeling sheds." But crucially, AP was entirely wrong about this in the only case they specifically mention--Nekkanti--and they are forced to admit this later in this same article. The fact is that there is no connection between Nekkanti's company's state-of-the-art facilities and the "peeling sheds" AP reporters claim to have visited. Incredibly, despite the fact that they were proven wrong on the specifics, they elected to print this anyway.

AP And while the larger corporate processing facilities appear to meet hygiene and labor standards, CAL said, there are hidden abuses at the onsite hostels where shrimp peelers are housed.

AP again provides no specific evidence of any actual labor or hygiene issues taking place at our member processing facilities. We pointed out to AP multiple times that there had never been complaints registered against the members she asked about, despite the existence of multiple, safe channels for employees and others to report issues.

AP "No one can enter, no one can leave without permission," labor organizer Chekkala Rajkumar, district secretary for the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, told AP about the large facilities in his region. He compared them to British colonial penal colonies. "Anyone talking about the working conditions is kicked out. It's not a worker friendly atmosphere." He said pregnant women sometimes miscarry because of the arduous work.

AP We provided AP with detailed, factual information about our members that directly refute this allegation. Employees can opt in or opt out of living in onsite dormitories at will, and they are free to come and go for any reason, as they please. The only requirement is that they sign out. We shared these logs with the AP. Our members do indeed have security at their facilities, but for the protection of their employees and their property, not for "surveillance."

AP The shrimp at this facility were later loaded in large plastic crates into a truck with the brand "NEKKANTI" painted in large letters. Managers at the small shed said Nekkanti Sea Foods and other major brands often outsource the labor-intensive peeling and deveining work to keep down costs.

Nekkanti, however, says all its shrimp is processed in a handful of massive company-owned processing facilities approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. A marketing video produced by Nekkanti, which is projecting \$150 million in revenues this year, shows shrimp peelers in a spotless room, with shiny tables, and workers wearing gloves, head coverings, face masks, rubber boots and waterproof aprons.

John Ducar, an advisor to the board of Nekkanti Sea Foods, said the company had nothing to do with the peeling shed that AP visited and said their branded truck was there only because it was being leased to another company. He provided a document that said Nekkanti was paid \$3,600 for the four-month lease of a truck with the license number the AP observed.

"It appears that you observed the operations of an entirely separate company," he said.

The company named in the document did not respond to a request for comment.

Though Nekkanti had no connection to the shed or the shipment observed by the AP, Ducar said, the company will work to improve conditions at neighboring shrimp sheds and is reconsidering leasing its trucks.

Importers that responded to requests for comment about possible labor abuses said they would investigate, with some suspending business in the meantime.

AP This set of claims was the basis for AP reporters accosting Nekkanti customers with accusations that, as admitted here, were entirely baseless. And yet outrageously, AP brags about those false allegations--which they concede are false--led to some customers suspending business with the company.

AP Sysco, the nation's largest food distributor, has imported in the past from both Nekkanti and Wellcome. A spokesperson said they stopped doing business with Wellcome in 2022 after the Indian firm "refused to allow us to conduct a required social responsibility audit in their facility." Wellcome did not respond to requests for comment.

AP It is entirely false that Wellcome did not respond to requests for comment. In fact, Wellcome never heard from AP at all, and gave them no opportunity to respond to these disparagements. If AP had reached out, Wellcome would have provided the same details of its strong labor and environmental record that it provided to the customers to whom AP presented these unsubstantiated allegations.