



CHANGING NATURE OF FISHING ECONOMY IN KONKAN: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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INTRODUCTION:

The Konkan coast of Maharashtra is one of India's most productive marine fishing regions. Extending approximately 720 km along the Arabian Sea, the region includes coastal districts such as Palghar, Thane, Mumbai, Raigad, Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg. The coastal geography of the Konkan region—with numerous estuaries, creeks, mangrove ecosystems and a narrow continental shelf—has historically provided favourable conditions for marine fisheries. Fishing communities such as the Koli, Gabit, Bhandari and Ramponkar have traditionally depended on marine resources for livelihood, food security and cultural identity.¹ Jadhav (2013, p. 48)

Fishing in Konkan historically developed as a subsistence-oriented artisanal occupation. Fishermen relied on traditional wooden boats and simple fishing gear such as gill nets, hook-and-line and shore seine nets. These fishing practices were closely linked with seasonal fish migration patterns and the monsoon cycle. Traditional fishing communities followed customary rules governing resource sharing, labour distribution and conflict resolution within the community.² Kurien (1998, p. 212)

The formation of the Maharashtra state in 1960 marked an important turning point in fisheries development. Government programmes began promoting modernisation through mechanisation, infrastructure development and fisheries cooperatives. During the 1960s and 1970s, several fishing harbours and landing centres were developed along the Konkan coast. The introduction of motorised boats and trawlers increased fish production and expanded fishing activities into deeper waters.³ Government of India (2016, p. 27)

A second major transformation occurred after 1991, when India adopted economic liberalisation policies. The Liberalisation-Privatisation-Globalisation (LPG) reforms integrated India's fisheries sector into global seafood markets. Export-oriented fisheries expanded rapidly, and new technologies such as deep-sea trawlers, refrigeration systems and electronic navigation equipment were widely adopted. At the same time, coastal aquaculture and shrimp farming began attracting private investment.⁴ FAO (2018, p. 63)

According to the *Economic Survey of Maharashtra*, the state has a coastline of about 720 km, more than 173 fish landing centres, and marine fish production of about 4.35 lakh metric tonnes in 2023-24.⁵ Government of Maharashtra (2025, p. 201)

While these developments significantly increased fish production and export earnings, they also created new challenges. These include overfishing, declining marine biodiversity, environmental degradation, and socio-economic inequality among fishing communities. As a result, the concept of sustainable and inclusive fisheries development has become increasingly important in recent policy discussions.

This study, therefore, examines the changing nature of the fishing economy in Konkan, focusing on the transformation of fisheries since the post-1960 period, with special emphasis on the post-1991 liberalisation era and its implications for sustainable and inclusive development.

Historical Development of the Fishing Economy in Konkan (Pre-1960)

Fishing has been practised in the Konkan region for many centuries. The Arabian Sea provided rich marine resources that enabled coastal communities to depend on fishing as a major source of livelihood. Early fishing activities were carried out using traditional wooden boats, canoes, and handmade nets.

Fishing communities developed detailed knowledge about sea currents, tides, and seasonal fish availability. These traditional ecological practices allowed fishermen to sustain fishing activities without causing major ecological damage.

During the medieval period, Konkan also became an important part of the maritime trade network of the Arabian Sea. Dried fish and salted fish were transported to inland markets where marine fish was not available. These fish products formed an important component of the coastal trade economy.

Fishing activities were largely organised at the village level, and fishing grounds were controlled through customary community practices. The division of labour within fishing households was also clearly defined. Men were mainly involved in catching fish at sea, while women handled cleaning, drying, and selling fish in markets.

Studies of traditional fishing communities in Konkan suggest that fishing knowledge was transmitted across generations through practical experience and community traditions.⁶ Ulman, Talathi & Naik (2008, p. 314)

Thus, the fishing economy before the 1960s was characterised by:

- small-scale fishing operations
- traditional boats and nets
- community-based management of fishing grounds
- strong participation of women in fish marketing
- limited government involvement in fisheries

Fishing Economy in Konkan: Post-1960 to 1991

After the formation of Maharashtra state in 1960, fisheries began receiving greater attention as a sector capable of generating employment, improving nutrition and earning foreign exchange. During the early decades after independence, the Konkan fishing economy was dominated by traditional artisanal fisheries.

Fishermen operated close to the coastline and depended heavily on seasonal weather conditions. Fishing activities were usually organised through family-based labour systems or community groups. Women played a crucial role in fish processing, drying and marketing in local markets.⁷ Bavinck (2001, p. 115)

Government intervention during the 1960s and 1970s introduced modernisation programmes aimed at increasing fish production. One of the most important initiatives was the Indo-Norwegian Fisheries Development Project, which introduced mechanised fishing vessels and modern fishing gear to India. The programme also helped establish fisheries training institutes and infrastructure facilities such as harbours, ice plants and cold storage units.

In Maharashtra, fishing harbours such as Sassoon Dock in Mumbai, Ratnagiri harbour and Malvan landing centre became important hubs for marine fisheries. These facilities improved fish handling and marketing systems.

Table 1: Marine Fisheries Resources in Maharashtra

Indicator	Statistics
Coastline length	720 km
Marine fishing villages	720+
Fish landing centres	173
Marine fisher population	3,64,899
Marine fisher families	87,717

Source: CMFRI (2020, p. 12)⁸**Table 2: Growth of Marine Fish Production in India (1960–1990)**

Year	Marine Fish Production (Million Tonnes)
1960	0.88
1970	1.45
1980	1.89
1990	2.46

Source: FAO Fisheries Statistics (2016)⁹

The introduction of mechanised trawlers significantly increased fishing capacity. Trawlers could travel farther offshore and capture larger quantities of fish. As a result, marine fish production increased rapidly during the 1970s and 1980s.

However, modernisation also generated conflicts between traditional artisanal fishermen and mechanised trawler operators. Artisanal fishermen argued that trawlers damaged fishing grounds and reduced fish stocks in near-shore waters. This conflict led to policy interventions such as seasonal fishing bans and restrictions on trawler operations.⁷ Bavinck (2001, p. 122)

Thus, the period between 1960 and 1991 witnessed a transition from traditional subsistence fishing to a more mechanised and commercialised fishing economy.

Transformation of the Konkan Fishing Economy after 1991

The year 1991 marked a major turning point in India's economic policy. Economic liberalisation reforms opened Indian markets to international trade and encouraged private investment. These reforms had a significant impact on the fisheries sector, particularly in coastal regions such as Konkan. One of the most visible outcomes of liberalisation was the rapid growth of marine product exports. India became one of the world's largest exporters of seafood, especially frozen shrimp, squid and cuttlefish. According to the Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA), seafood exports from India reached more than USD 7 billion in 2022, reflecting the global demand for Indian marine products.¹⁰ MPEDA (2022, p. 34)

Table 3: Marine Fishing Vessels in Maharashtra

Type of Vessel	Number
Mechanised boats	13,700
Motorised traditional craft	1,623
Non-motorised craft	1,000+
Total vessels	15,323

Source: Government of Maharashtra (2025, p. 205)⁵

Table 4: Marine Fish Production in Maharashtra

Year	Production
2010	3.4 lakh tonnes
2015	3.9 lakh tonnes
2020	4.2 lakh tonnes
2023-24	4.35 lakh tonnes

Source: Government of Maharashtra (2025, p. 201)⁵

Technological advancements supporting this growth included:

- Mechanised trawlers
- Purse-seine fishing
- Multi-day fishing vessels
- GPS navigation
- Sonar fish-finding equipment

These technologies enabled fishermen to travel further into deep-sea fishing zones and capture larger volumes of fish.

Impact of Globalisation on Coastal Livelihoods

Large commercial fishing enterprises began dominating the marine fisheries sector. These enterprises possessed greater capital resources and modern technology, allowing them to operate more efficiently than traditional fishermen. As a result, small-scale fishermen often faced difficulties competing with large mechanised fleets.¹¹ Jentoft (2007, p. 96)

Another important change was the expansion of coastal aquaculture, especially shrimp farming. Shrimp exports became a major source of foreign exchange for India. However, intensive shrimp farming also raised environmental concerns such as salinisation of agricultural land and destruction of mangrove ecosystems.⁴ FAO (2018, p. 71)

Thus, globalisation transformed the Konkan fishing economy into a more market-oriented and export-driven sector, but it also generated social and ecological challenges.

Sustainability Challenges in the Konkan Fisheries Sector

Rapid expansion of fishing activities has created significant environmental challenges in the Konkan region. Overfishing, habitat destruction and pollution threaten marine biodiversity and long-term fish productivity.

Scientific studies indicate that many commercially important fish species have experienced declining catch rates due to excessive fishing pressure. Coastal ecosystems such as mangroves and coral-associated habitats, which serve as breeding grounds for fish, are also under threat from coastal development and industrial pollution.¹² ICAR-CMFRI (2021, p. 52)

Climate change has further intensified these challenges. Rising sea temperatures, ocean acidification and extreme weather events are affecting marine ecosystems and fish migration patterns.

Inclusive Development and Government Policy Initiatives

Recognising the importance of fisheries for coastal livelihoods, the Government of India and the Government of Maharashtra have introduced several programmes aimed at promoting sustainable and inclusive development.

One of the most significant recent initiatives is the **Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY)**, launched in 2020. The scheme aims to increase fish production, improve fisheries infrastructure and enhance fishermen's incomes through technological modernisation and value chain development.¹³ Government of India (2020, p. 11)

Other policy measures include:

- Seasonal fishing bans
- Subsidies for modern fishing equipment
- Insurance schemes for fishermen
- Development of fish processing infrastructure
- Mangrove conservation programmes

Policy Suggestions for Sustainable Development of the Konkan Fishing Economy

Community-based fisheries management systems can empower traditional fishing communities to participate in decision-making and resource conservation. Studies have shown that local participation improves compliance with fishing regulations and enhances resource sustainability.¹¹ Jentoft (2007, p. 104)

The transformation of the Konkan fishing economy over the past several decades highlights the need for balanced policies that combine economic growth with ecological sustainability and social equity. The fisheries sector plays a crucial role in providing employment, food security and regional economic development in coastal Maharashtra. However, increasing fishing pressure, technological expansion and global market integration have also created new environmental and socio-economic challenges. Therefore, a comprehensive policy framework is required to ensure the long-term sustainability of marine resources while protecting the livelihoods of coastal communities.

First, sustainable fisheries management must be strengthened through scientific regulation and monitoring. Government authorities should ensure strict enforcement of seasonal fishing bans, mesh size regulations and zoning rules that restrict mechanised trawlers from operating in near-shore areas reserved for artisanal fishermen. Scientific stock assessments and regular monitoring of fish populations should guide fisheries policy to prevent overexploitation of marine resources.

Second, community participation should be integrated into fisheries governance. Traditional fishing communities possess valuable knowledge of marine ecosystems, seasonal patterns and fishing practices. Their participation in decision-making processes can improve compliance with regulations and strengthen conservation efforts. Community-based fisheries management systems, involving local cooperatives and fisher associations, can help regulate fishing activities and promote responsible resource use.

Third, infrastructure development must be expanded in a way that benefits small-scale fishermen. Investment in fish landing centres, cold storage facilities, ice plants, transportation networks and local fish markets can improve the efficiency of fish marketing while reducing post-harvest losses. At the same time, access to institutional credit and subsidies for modern fishing equipment should be made more accessible to small and medium fishermen rather than being concentrated among large commercial operators.

Fourth, environmental protection must be prioritised as a central component of fisheries policy. Mangrove ecosystems, estuaries and coastal wetlands serve as breeding grounds for many fish species and play an important role in maintaining marine biodiversity. Conservation programmes aimed at protecting these ecosystems should be strengthened, along with measures to control coastal pollution and unregulated aquaculture practices.

Fifth, diversification of livelihood opportunities can reduce pressure on marine resources and enhance the economic resilience of fishing communities. Activities such as fish processing, value-added marine products, eco-tourism, seaweed cultivation and small-scale aquaculture can provide alternative sources of income. Special attention should also be given to supporting women involved in fish processing and marketing through training, credit facilities and market access.

Finally, climate change adaptation strategies must be integrated into coastal development planning. Rising sea levels, changing ocean temperatures and extreme weather events are likely to affect marine ecosystems and fishing activities. Early warning systems, disaster preparedness measures and climate-resilient infrastructure can help fishing communities adapt to these environmental changes.

Through a combination of sustainable resource management, inclusive development policies and community participation, the Konkan fishing economy can continue to support livelihoods while preserving marine ecosystems for future generations.

CONCLUSION

The fishing economy of the Konkan region has undergone a profound transformation over the past six decades. In the early post-1960 period, fisheries were characterised by traditional artisanal practices and community-based labour systems. Government modernisation programmes introduced mechanisation and infrastructure development, leading to increased fish production.

The liberalisation reforms of 1991 further accelerated this transformation by integrating the fisheries sector into global markets. Export-oriented fisheries, mechanised fishing technology and aquaculture development expanded the scale of marine fisheries in the region.

However, these developments have also created challenges related to environmental sustainability and socio-economic inequality. Overfishing, ecological degradation and marginalisation of small-scale fishermen remain significant concerns.

Future fisheries policy must therefore focus on sustainable and inclusive development, ensuring that marine resources are conserved while providing secure livelihoods for coastal communities.

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