

# Brainy and Brawny Pigs Deserve Recognition and Support

## SHRIDHAR speaks



**Tarun Shridhar**  
Director General,  
Indian Chamber of  
Food and Agriculture (ICFA);  
and former Secretary,  
Ministry of Fisheries, Animal  
Husbandry and Dairying,  
Government of India

**"I am very proud to be called a pig. It stands for pride, integrity and guts."**

—Ronald Reagan

"Pigs Have Wings" observed PG Wodehouse through the title of his novel laced with gentle humour, yet we are familiar with the idiom "Pigs don't fly". Wodehouse spoke figuratively, and we know that unlike poultry, its competitor in the meat sector, neither do pigs have wings nor can they fly. But while the poultry species may be rich in eggs and meat, they certainly cannot be credited with any great flying prowess. So, in a way, the pigs too have taken another kind of flight to emerge as one of the biggest contributors to the meat basket of the world, thus making valuable addition to food and nutrition security. If the world consumed about 145-150 million tonnes poultry meat in the year gone by, pig meat i.e. pork was not too far behind at 124 million tonnes; bovine meat at 78 million tonnes and ovine at 17 million, no doubt popular choices in several regions, are not worthy to be called challengers to the eminence of poultry.

Poultry has been growing consistently, and impressively; the prognosis validated through innumerable studies projects similar growth in the years to come, and this growth would be the most striking in South Asia, hence India. Being the most

accessible, affordable, and above all acceptable meat, poultry shall continue to rule the roost all across the world. Pig meat shall, however, remain the second; and the margin of difference shall continue to increase as unlike poultry, pig meat, despite being the most protein dense, has been facing near stagnant growth over the past few decades and it has now registered a marginal negative growth.

Pigs, like small ruminants such as goats and sheep, are a viable enterprise, especially for small holders. Pigs require little initial investment; they are prolific and are good feed to meat converters compared to other livestock such as cattle. Pigs produce meat (pork) without contributing to the degradation of grazing lands and pork is particularly suitable for processing. Further, pork provides a more varied diet and pigs are one of the rare livestock species where nearly all parts of the animal can be consumed.

Why is pig meat taking a different trajectory? Delving into this question has thrown up a wealth of interesting information and answers.

Some foods, indeed, are taboos in different religious and ethnic groups, and hence tend to invite strong aversion. But no food evokes such intense opposition, nay hostility, as pork in some religious communities. One fourth of the global population is Islamic, and pork is the strictest of taboos in the religion of Islam. Obviously, the pig enters the competition for a share in the meat sector with a major handicap. In fact, Jews and some denominations of Christianity too shun pork. And, even though there is no outright prohibition, the majority of Hindus also avoid pork consumption as pig is considered an unclean animal.

Some theories suggest that the taboo that exists across the globe might have originated in the Middle East, the trigger

being the pigs' high water consumption in a water scarce region and their destructive nature towards crops. Further, the tendency of the pigs to scavenge makes them less desirable as a food source compared to other livestock. While not the primary reason, some also believe that the taboo might have stemmed from health concerns, as pigs were, in the past, believed to be carriers of diseases. However, the core explanations for aversion to pig and its meat are the strong religious and cultural beliefs; violations of the taboo get to be viewed as grave religious insults or cultural transgressions.

The gentlest of the livestock species, pigs have been a victim of the most irrational of prejudices which has led to spreading of misinformation, falsehoods and canards about them. It is high time we get the facts straight and judge the pig anew.

Pigsty, that is how we refer to any room or place that is dirty or messy. What a travesty associating one of the cleanest animals with dirt and mess! Pigs do not defecate where they eat or sleep; in fact, even the newborn piglets would walk away from their abode to relieve themselves; aren't they a notch above the human babies too? Pigs do not sweat as they don't have many sweat glands, yet we have the pejorative proverb "sweat like a pig" perpetuating the falsehood. It certainly is defamatory to the entire species. Yes, the pigs do roll and wade in mud, and swim in water. They need to keep cool in the absence of sweating. An added reason is to prevent the skin from getting sunburned. How different is it from our species lying on the sand on the beaches?

Associating stupidity with pigs is another stupid idea of ours. Do we not have a proverb for this, "to cast pearls before swine"? You would be surprised to learn



that pigs are considered one of the smartest mammals on Earth. A pig possesses the intelligence level of a human toddler. It has been observed that a pig is able to solve complex problems, use tools to get things done, understand numbers, recognise their own names and respond when they are called. In experimental studies conducted, pigs could locate objects and even identify images on the screen. This reveals that pigs display the same characteristics that we associate with intelligent animals such as dogs. Because of their excellent memory, pigs are trainable and capable of much more than we give them credit for.

Not only do the pigs possess advanced communication skills, they also have excellent memory and the ability to use spatial information. As they have a wide range of hearing, they communicate with one another through auditory signals. Amazingly, they can also communicate with humans as they have the capacity to learn to decipher human gestures and vocal cues. They can navigate through mazes and return to their fold even after traversing long distances.

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of 10.25 million tonnes last year. Pig farming remains a vocation in some specific areas such as the North East, and in specific communities. In fact, the prejudices are so strongly ingrained that

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piggery gets associated with those who are considered to be in the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy. By holding on to these prejudices we would be denying our population access to rich, yet affordable, sources of nutrition. After all, lean pork is a storehouse of proteins, vitamins and minerals; it is generally agreed that pork

provides the most valuable support for muscle mass retention. Moreover, pigs are an extremely versatile livestock species. They could be raised in a spectrum of systems ranging from massive, capital-intensive production units to small, labour-intensive family units, in which pigs scavenge for food. Being highly social animals, they happily coexist with others, thus they are a good species for mixed livestock farming.

Promotion of pig farming and encouraging consumption of pork would be a huge challenge. It is curious that despite being the most populous nation and one of the fastest growing economies in the world, we stand at the bottom of the ladder in consumption of meat at a per capita of a paltry around 3 kilograms per year, marginally behind our neighbour Bangladesh which stands at 3.4 kilograms. Another paradox is that

we are the fifth biggest producer of meat in the world. Religion and culture remain the most significant influences in our choice of foods. Still worth a try to go *whole hog* and advocate incentivising piggery for nutrition and economic development.

Pigs are more than just *oink* and *grunt*; they are certainly not *boaring*.