

Indian Chamber of Commerce Spotlights 'Futuristic Tea' on International Tea Day 2024

Kolkata, 21st May 2024: The Indian Chamber of Commerce celebrated International Tea Day on Tuesday, 21st May 2024, with a focus on "Futuristic Tea." The event featured discussions on various topics including the Indian Tea Brand, engaging the youth with tea, exploring new international markets, formulating a new tea policy for India and addressing the future prospects and challenges of Indian tea, with an emphasis on sustainability. Prominent speakers included Dr Subrata Gupta, IAS, Additional Chief Secretary, Food Processing & Horticulture Department, Government of West Bengal; Mr. Debasish Sen, IAS, Former Additional Chief Secretary to the Govt. of West Bengal, Information Technology & Electronics Department and Former Chairman-Managing Director, WBHIDCO; Ms Shailja Mehta, Director, Jardin Henderson Ltd & Vice President, TAI; Ms Chaitali Das, Director, Rakshak Group & MD, Route2Jute Pvt Ltd; Mr Vikram S Gulia, MD, Amalgamated Plantations Pvt Ltd, TATA Subsidiary & Chairman, ICC Tea Committee; Mr. Ravi Suchanti, Co-Chair, ICC Team Committee; and Ms Susmita Dasgupta, Founder, Tea with Susmita & ICC Tea Committee Member. These industry leaders shared their valuable insights on the future of the Indian tea industry.

Commenting on the prevalent situation of the local industry, Dr Subrata Gupta, IAS, Additional Chief Secretary, Food Processing & Horticulture Department, Government of West Bengal, said, "Tea is a beverage that needs no introduction. Over the years, the variety of tea available has expanded significantly. The name "tea" has become associated with a wide range of beverages, some of which do not even contain tea leaves. My association with the tea industry has allowed me to witness its development and challenges over time. One major issue facing the industry, much like the jute sector, is the balance between government control and free market operations. This mix can sometimes benefit the industry but often hampers its natural market dynamics. Traditionally, the focus has been on increasing production. However, this approach can be problematic if it is not matched by an increase in demand, exposing farmers to market fluctuations. This issue is seen in the horticultural sector, where overproduction leads to price drops and wastage. In the tea industry, the emphasis should shift from quantity to quality. The extensive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides has raised consumer concerns about the safety and quality of their beverages. Consumers today are more conscious of what they consume and expect transparency about the contents of their food and drinks. To address sustainability, we must consider reducing the use of chemicals. In West Bengal, we have encouraged the use of biofertilisers and compost, which has benefited the soil and the crops. I believe similar practices can be adopted in tea cultivation to enhance soil health and tea quality. We have conducted detailed soil surveys in Kalimpong and Darjeeling, revealing significant soil degradation. We are now working with soil scientists to restore these soils without heavy reliance on chemical fertilisers. I encourage the tea industry to undertake similar surveys to assess soil health and explore sustainable practices. The state government has also implemented a policy allowing tea gardens to use a portion of their land for other productive purposes, such as tourism, healthcare, education and horticulture. This diversification can provide additional income streams and reduce reliance on tea alone. Some tea gardens have successfully cultivated black pepper and other spices alongside tea. I urge tea gardens to explore the potential of their surplus land for growing vegetables, fruits, and medicinal plants. This approach can significantly enhance their income and sustainability. Dr. Samuel Wright and I are available to discuss potential collaborations and provide support in these initiatives to ensure a sustainable and prosperous future for the tea industry."

Iterating on the concept 'Tea for Youth,' Mr. Debasish Sen, IAS, Former Additional Chief Secretary to the Govt. of West Bengal, Information Technology & Electronics Department and Former Chairman-Managing Director, WBHIDCO, said, "I'd like to highlight that we have a unique tea garden right here in Kolkata, situated at Eco-Park. Speaking of 'Futuristic Tea,' let's focus on promoting ethnic teas like "lebu cha" (lemon tea). We should advertise tea in a distinctive manner, departing from traditional beverage branding strategies. Furthermore, akin to coffee houses, it's time we establish tea houses to cater to the preferences of our current generation."

While introducing the theme, Ms Shailja Mehta, Director, Jardin Henderson Ltd & Vice President, TAI, said, "International Tea Day is a day dedicated to recognising the rich history, cultural significance and economic importance of tea worldwide. The primary objective of this day is to raise awareness about the enduring legacy of tea and to promote sustainable production practices. This day serves as a platform to spotlight the global tea trade and its impact on economies and communities. Tackling industry challenges mandates collective efforts aimed at enhancing vitality and global outreach to bolster the indigenous sector."

Speaking on the New International Markets, Mr Vikram S Gulia, MD, Amalgamated Plantations Pvt Ltd, TATA Subsidiary & Chairman, ICC Tea Committee, said, "Tea is more than just a beverage here; it is deeply ingrained in our culture and traditions. Assam, Nilgiri and Dooars are the major tea-producing regions in India, renowned for their rich aroma and exceptional quality. Today, we honour this extraordinary beverage and the hardworking individuals in the tea gardens who make it possible. Tea has a remarkable history and continues to evolve, remaining a staple in households across India. As we celebrate, we must also focus on sustainability and improving the livelihoods of tea garden workers. Our goal is to foster a collaborative environment that promotes innovation and sustainability in the tea industry. Despite India's rich tea heritage, no Indian tea brand has achieved significant global popularity. We face challenges in promoting our tea internationally. To address this, we should encourage initiatives like "Chai Ho Jaaye," which aims to engage the youth as tea consumers. Additionally, we need to raise awareness and appreciation for tea through various channels such as tea marathons, film placements and advertisements. By taking these initiatives, we can position Indian tea prominently on the global stage and ensure its legacy continues to thrive."

Speaking on the tea promotion, Ms Susmita Dasgupta, Founder, Tea with Susmita & ICC Tea Committee Member, said, "A comprehensive marketing and promotional plan has been submitted to the Government of India, aiming to enhance awareness and consumption of tea both domestically and globally. Despite being a major tea producer, India ranks 41st in per-capita consumption of tea, indicating room for growth in domestic consumption. To address this, we must also focus on increasing tea consumption worldwide and improving the global brand positioning of Indian tea. Several strategies have been proposed to achieve these goals. Firstly, we propose conducting daily roadshows in multiple countries, showcasing the diverse varieties of tea and educating consumers about their unique qualities. Additionally, an annual tea championship can be organised to attract attention and highlight the excellence of Indian tea on an international platform. Furthermore, organising tea workshops at prominent events can serve as another effective way to promote tea globally. In today's era of digital entertainment, we can leverage product placement strategies in movies and series to generate awareness about tea among audiences worldwide. By implementing these strategies, we can not only boost domestic tea consumption in India but also strengthen the global presence and perception of Indian tea."

Speaking about Indian tea brands, Mr. Ravi Suchanti, Co-Chair, ICC Team Committee, stated, “It's evident that we boast excellent domestic brands, yet their global exposure remains limited due to our predominantly domestic market focus. With half of our population comprising youth under 30 years old, targeting this demographic becomes imperative in promoting tea consumption. To resonate with the youth, we need to infuse a sense of trendiness and flavour into the beverage. Given India's predominantly warm weather conditions, offering both hot and cold tea variants can cater to diverse preferences and seasons, ensuring year-round appeal. Additionally, as sustainability gains prominence globally, focusing on eco-friendly practices within the tea industry is not just desirable but essential for long-term success. By aligning our strategies to tap into the youth market, offering diverse tea options, and prioritising sustainability, we can not only enhance domestic consumption but also pave the way for Indian tea brands to gain recognition and acceptance on the global stage.”

Focusing on the collaborative part of the tea & jute industry, Ms Chaitali Das, Director, Rakshak Group & MD, Route2Jute Pvt Ltd, said, “Both the jute and tea industries are complementary and mutually beneficial. Jute presents a wonderful packaging option for tea, offering sustainability and eco-friendliness. As we are already advocating for sustainability and reducing carbon footprint, utilising eco-friendly jute bags for tea packaging is a natural choice. Moreover, customising Diwali, Holi, corporate and social jute hampers can serve as excellent gifting options, combining the goodness of tea with the eco-friendly appeal of jute. Tea has seamlessly integrated into our daily lives and similarly, jute has established itself as a versatile and sustainable material. Embracing jute packaging for tea not only promotes environmental consciousness but also reinforces the cultural and economic significance of both industries.”