

Tea industry proposes new marketing effort

Plans to restart exports from Dooars after 27 years

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The export of Dooars tea might resume after 27 years since it lost the foreign market to players from Kenya and other countries owing to a proposed branding effort from tea producers.

The Indian Tea Association (ITA) has proposed an idea whereby 10 gardens, of the total 290 in the Dooars region, have been identified and they will brand their produce under the brand name Dooars Robusta.

According to the proposal, the existing Assam and Dooars logos of the Tea Board used for packaged tea will be redesigned. This will not only help command better prices but also build brands for various Indian tea variants.

“We need to promote marquee gardens, which produce high-quality tea. By doing so, not only will the price realisation of these gardens improve, it will also impress upon foreign buyers that the produce from the region is of good quality,” Azam Monem, chairman of the ITA, told Business Standard.

These marquee gardens should meet the required compliances from Trust Tea, which ensures the tea from a garden to have met specified quality, production, ethical and labourer welfare standards. Environmental certifications assuring plant protection codes and the organic nature of produce are also a prerequisite.

According to the ITA, such promotion of selected gardens as Dooars Robusta will not be country-specific, but aims at high-end tea boutiques, five-star catering, and hospitality institutions and duty-free airport stores worldwide.

Besides, it will also help the producers to get promotional support from the India Brand Equity Fund, which is a Union commerce ministry initiative.

Although the quality of Dooars tea, as compared to the ones from Assam had been an issue, the Dooars produce found popularity among the Russian blenders (owing to cheap price) who used this tea to blend high grade Assam CTC (crush, tear, curl) tea.

Its death blow came in 1991, when the Indo-Soviet bilateral trade agreement ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Owing to that bilateral trade agreement, Dooars tea was priced much below Kenyan CTC and enjoyed a favourable currency conversion at home. However, the moment the treaty ended, Kenyan CTC, which was of much superior quality, became cheaper than Dooars tea and the Russian blenders abruptly stopped purchases of Dooars tea.

Around 100 million kg of tea from the Dooars-Terai region was exported overseas in the early 1990s.

However, among allegations of quality of the Dooars yield, Monem said there were a few gardens in the Dooars region that could outrun even Assam's finest.

“The proposed initiative will help in reviving exports from the Dooars region. We have lost the export market entirely and cater for the domestic one. If this channel reopens again, it will not only help in bringing in forex but reinstate the Dooars brand as well,” a garden owner from the Dooars region said.

An exporter said that such a move would also help in the premiumisation drive as more produce could be marked “premium”. Currently, only Darjeeling Tea, which is produced in very limited quantity, enjoys a premium status, followed by a minuscule amount by the Assam gardens.

A similar initiative has been proposed for Assam tea also where around 30 estates have been identified by the ITA which can be given the Assam Exotica brand tag.

For Assam gardens, which enjoy a strong brand recall value among international buyers, the initiative will help better the prices.

The proposal, apparently has received support from both the West Bengal and Assam governments who have assured support in the branding initiative by talking to the union commerce ministry to get promotional funds.

The ITA has now approached the Union commerce ministry for approval and promotional support and is in advanced stages of talks.