

Tea to get hotter with national drink tag?

Amit Bhattacharya | TNN

New Delhi: It's the most common drink in the country after water. So what added benefits can a 'national drink' status bring to tea, especially since it is unlikely to be accompanied with special incentives or tax breaks? Plenty, say tea industry insiders and experts.

Last week, Planning Commission deputy chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia said the government was considering making tea India's national drink. The announcement, he said, was likely to be made next year. The debate it has triggered — with Amul making a pitch in favour of milk — isn't a storm in a teacup. The status is likely to bring lasting paybacks to the tea industry, feel insiders. "In terms of consumption, tea is already India's national drink," says S K Jain, managing director of LMJ International, tea exporters. "But getting a formal tag will help us build tea into a bigger brand."

As India's national drink, Jain said tea would get more prominence in the government's promotional activities and functions, strengthening the beverage's association with India in global markets. "The tag will definitely boost domestic demand for tea," says Indian Tea Board chairman M G V K Bhanu. "It would also fetch long term benefits, as the government is likely to give priority to addressing its problems."

Bhanu added that such recognition will help the bo-

INDIA'S CUP OF JOY

Origin Tea said to have been discovered in 2737 BC by the second emperor of China, Shen Nung, when tea leaves blew into his cup of hot water

INDIA TEALINE

1778 | British naturalist Sir Joseph Banks suggests India grow imported Chinese tea. Attempts don't succeed for 50 years

1815-1831 | Samples of indigenous Indian tea plants sent to an East India Company botanist who is slowly convinced that these are bona fide tea plants

1835 | East India Company starts first tea plantations in Assam

1840 | Assam Tea Company begins commercial production run by indentured servitude of locals

1856 | With plants smuggled from China, tea planted in and around Darjeeling

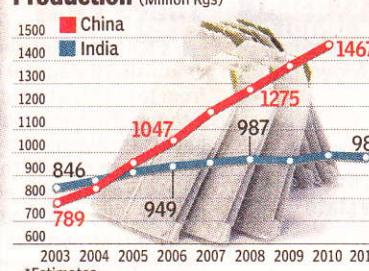
1859 | Tea production begins in Nilgiris

Late 1890s | Assam tea plants take over imported Chinese plants in India. Production booms, making Assam the leading tea producing region in the world

rd promote Indian tea as a health drink, focusing on "scientific data that says that black tea is just as beneficial as green tea". Montek's statement comes at a feel-good time for the industry. "The industry has overcome a period

STEAMING STATS

Production (Million Kgs)



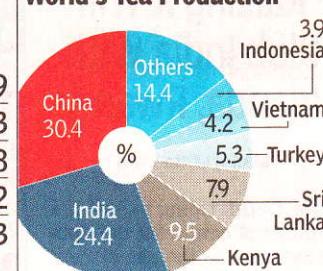
*Estimates

India Exports (Million Kg)

2007	179
2008	203
2009	198
2010	222
2011*	193

*Estimates

World's Tea Production



TEAVIA

Southern China and Assam are the only two regions in the world with native tea plants

Though China overtook India in overall production around 2005, India remains world's largest black tea producer

Unlike most Indian tea, Darjeeling tea comes from a Chinese variety. It's the only tea with a geographical indication tag. Called 'Champagne of teas'

of slump. Demand is up and so are wages for workers this year," says Alok Chakraborty, secretary of trade union INTUC's West Bengal unit and member of the tea board.

However, the industry still has to contend with prob-

lems of tapering growth. With land no longer available for expanding production, India's tea output has stagnated.

Bhanu says the board has adopted a two-pronged plan. The first strategy is to encourage small growers to plant

tea — a scheme that has shown good results in Assam. The second is to replant old gardens for which the government provides a subsidy.

The tag will bring sharper focus to meeting these challenges, he says.