

Basmati export should be monitored in 'rightful manner'



Ashutosh Sharma

"APEDA needs to get a firm grip on the Basmati exports as it's losing its sheen in the international markets due to vested interests of some handful of players. Also, I feel, APEDA is the only body that can really be unbiased and take on the problems in a rightful manner" says **Ashutosh Sharma**, Proprietor of Authentic International. Established in 2000, the company represents many reputed overseas Basmati (and non-basmati) rice buyers/importers in India. Sharma also provides specialised consultancy to various Indian exporters from time-to-time and as such, his views although being personal, do cover and represent 'both sides of the coin', so as to say.

In a candid interview with Naveen Grover of *AgriBusiness & Food Industry*, he gives an insight into the current situation of Indian Basmati rice trade and also shares his views on its international scenario.

Significantly, India's rice sector making strides and reaching new markets. Are you satisfied with the current situation of the rice industry?

Beside Iran, which other new worthy markets are we talking about? Most of them were there even 10 years back. Basically, just the number of players and brands has increased many folds, both here as well as in the international markets. This is why we feel and notice such difference, otherwise there is not much to write about.

APEDA, the nodal body for agricultural commodity exports, celebrating its 25th anniversary this month. What would you like to suggest for better cooperation and coordination between rice trade and APEDA for sustainable growth?

First, my congratulations to APEDA for its silver jubilee anniversary. Professionally I have been dealing with APEDA, especially for Indian rice exports, since 1989 during my earlier years with M/s Mohan Exports Ltd right up to 2000, when I left L.T. Overseas Ltd and set up Authentic International. But till date, I go and meet various officials of the organisation on a personal basis whenever I need any guidance/clarification and they have always taken good care of the matter, and extended proper advice.

On the Basmati rice export front, I must say that APEDA needs to get a firm grip on the Basmati exports as it's losing its sheen in the international markets due to vested interests of some handful of players. Also I feel, APEDA is the only body that can really be unbiased and take on the problems in a

rightful manner, including the current IPT issue with the EU.

There has been a debate on the 'mega projects', being opened by leading rice millers in Amritsar. What are your comments on short term and long term impact of this on rice industry as a whole?

I have many friends in the industry and some of them will not like this. But anyway, the whole idea and reason behind this 'mega' is being defeated. Neither the local farmers are really benefiting, nor is the traditional rice industry happy about it. You have various rice varieties which are not grown in Punjab but being milled there. Why? Today, 'Basmati' is being grown all over the country-- MP, Rajasthan, etc and tomorrow it could be grown even in Goa! And a lot of this so called 'Basmati' is also reaching there. How? This 'how' and 'why' is the real crux of this issue. That's why I would say again -- APEDA is the only body for it and to monitor the situation, they need to get a 'firm grip' on Basmati exports before its too late. Then there will be no need to cry over spilt milk.

In the domestic front, the demand of branded Basmati rice is increasing including metro cities and small non traditional markets. In such a situation, what is the status of your brand and how do you plan to expand market for your product?

It's all due to the consumers' rising aspirations as also their income status. All of us want to try everything and consumer packed Basmati rice is no exception. We do

not have our own brand; we only help in building the brands for others, provided we have faith on them and they trust our hard work & honesty towards our work.

Technology upgradation is being taken very seriously by all rice millers. Do you have any plan to upgrade or expand your manufacturing as well as packaging facilities in near future?

We do not have our own facility. As we act as 'buying agents' for our esteemed foreign clients, we utilise the best available facility depending on their requirements. Some of the millers that we deal with have state-of-the-art facilities and some of the facilities are even better than the ones I have seen overseas.

What is your forecast--in export, domestic market, price and the like-- for this industry in the coming years? Which market do you prefer to export?

Forecasts are done by astrologers and weathermen, I am only a professional. But since you ask, I personally feel there will not be any big development. Markets are saturated, brands are aplenty and prices are already high. Buyers are also fed up of new hybrids coming every year. Someone was asking me when will India have a 007 variety?

I would like to request APEDA to intervene into this matter. Otherwise, the question 'which market will I prefer to export?' would change into 'who wants to buy from us?' in coming years.

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