

Export Marketing Of Tea Via The Internet

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INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest achievements of the twenty first century is the introduction of the most advanced communication network (i.e.) internet. The rapid strides that information and communication technologies (ICT) have made in recent years are extending their benefits to the agricultural sector. It is viewed that the future agricultural growth would be information driven. Information must reach the ultimate user at the fastest speed to harness its potential benefit. While online marketing is a part of mainstream marketing activity in the more developed markets, in India, it is still in the teething stage. Lack of awareness of the potential of internet and mobile, low awareness of how online marketing works and a general unwillingness to try new things are some factors responsible for the low level of online marketing in India. However, in the last three years, online marketing has seen a steep growth and seems to be gathering momentum in India.

The present study examines the possibilities for using information and communication technologies (ICT) and e-commerce in the marketing of tea, exported by developing countries in general and India in particular. In particular, it attempts to assess the extent to which prices and income accruing to commodity producers can be improved through the use of the internet. The study is motivated largely by the fact that a number of initiatives are already underway to use online marketing of agricultural commodities in developing countries - for example, coffee in Brazil and Kenya and tea in India and Sri Lanka. The study mainly concentrates on Business-to-Business (B2B) trade of tea in India and other developing world. Tea is a major commodity produced by a large number of countries in all developing regions. It has seen prices fall drastically in the past two decades. The price crisis has adversely affected millions of people since the production of tea is labour- intensive and the planting and processing of tea involves substantial rural employment in tea producing countries. To date, most of the measures that have been proposed or implemented to address problems involving the export prices of agricultural commodities have focused on commodity supply management, improving quality and liberalizing marketing. Little or no attention has been paid to take measures to deal with the distribution of export earnings between small producers on the one hand and large importing firms on the other. The study mainly focuses on five years - from 2005-2009, as to whether the internet can facilitate more direct marketing and bypass some intermediaries, thereby allowing producers to retain a larger share of the export price.

IMPORTANCE OF AGRICULTURAL EXPORTS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

The production and export of agricultural commodities from developing countries deserves attention because of the central role that these commodities play in the economies of those countries. In many developing countries, agricultural exports represent a considerable share of total export earnings and also of the total gross domestic product (GDP). While over the past few decades, many developing countries have diversified their economies by moving from exports of agricultural raw materials to commodity-based manufacturing, in many cases, this has involved the processing of domestically produced raw materials, and thus, agricultural production has continued to play a central role in their economies.

Over the years, a number of policies and strategies have been adopted at the national and international levels to help producers receive higher export prices so as to sustain production and promote overall economic development. A developing country's agricultural export, particularly tea, has tended to represent an important development issue because of its overall economic impact on the exporting country. While the bulk of the production takes place in

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developing countries, most of the consumption is in developed countries. For example, 92.7 per cent of world exports of tea come from 10 of the largest exporters, all of them developing countries, Argentina, China, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda and Vietnam, while more than half is sold to Western Europe, United States and Japan.

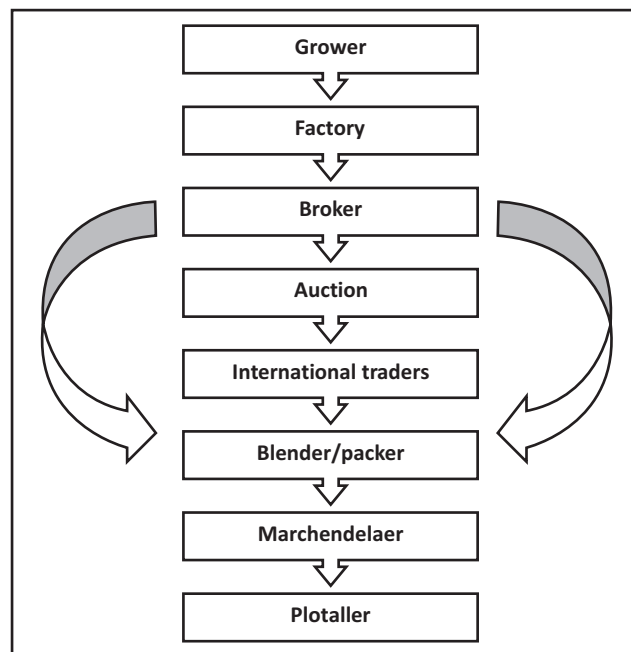
THE MARKETING OF TEA

The world tea trade has been undergoing several changes during the last few years. Export prices have decreased over the last decade, in part owing to oversupply, while production has increased faster than demand and tea has continued to face competition from other beverages. There is a growing gap between the prices paid to tea growers and those paid by consumers in importing countries. The three-auction average indicates a 25 percent decrease in tea prices. While the global prices declined from 19 to 42 per cent, the global tea exports have grown by 3.7 per cent annually in the past five years, in contrast to static demand, and exports are expected to increase in the future owing to expanded production. The decline in prices is also attributed to the loss of control by statutory bodies over marketing activities.

THE TEA EXPORT CHAIN

The tea export chain consists of a large number of intermediaries as can be seen Chart 1. Tea growers are either large tea estates or smallholder farmers. All tea growers need to access a tea factory, since brokers and the tea auctions do not deal in green tea leaves. The large estates own factories that process the green leaves before selling the tea to agents or through brokers. The small farmers typically sell the unprocessed tea either to large estates or to factories that specialize in tea processing. In some cases, they sell the leaves to private companies that then resell them to the tea factories. The small farmers are generally in the weakest bargaining position, given their small production and their inability to influence prices and to add value through downstream activities such as processing, blending and packaging. They also lack market information that can allow them to bargain effectively over prices and other marketing conditions.

Chart 1 : The Tea Value Chain



Source: UK Department for International Development, Report on Africa Beverages Project, No. 3 London

The processed tea is sold to brokers or auctioned directly for international sale. Brokers are internationally well-established firms with contacts in many consuming countries. Their role is to collect and disseminate tea data such as prices, yield, quality and export volumes. They also provide other services including grading, information on buyers' creditworthiness and reliability in making payments and monitoring of such things as warehousing conditions, pests,

damage and pilferage and government regulations on tea trade. The tea brokerage business is highly concentrated. There are only a few major brokers in the tea producing regions, although their market power is limited to some degree by the fact that large producers sell their produce directly without using brokers. Tea auctions bring together major tea sellers and buyers, who make open bids through brokers to reach a sale agreement. There are no reliable figures on the distribution of exports between those being channeled through the auctions and those going directly from garden (bypassing the auction). As an estimate, for example in the Indian trade in 2007, non-auction exports were 23.5 per cent of the total.

Further processing or value addition takes place in importing countries by tea blenders and packers, who purchase the tea either from the auctions in the producing countries or from international traders. A large share of the traded tea is imported directly by large tea packers and processors, some of which own the estates from which the tea is imported. As in the tea brokerage business, there is a high degree of concentration with regards to international traders and final processing/blending and packaging. On the buying side, the auctions tend to be dominated by big buyers, who ensure that most of the tea is auctioned in large lots. Multinational companies, on the other hand, dominate the blending and packaging processes, and they often seek to impose entry barriers on packaged and branded tea from producer countries. The final stages of the tea marketing chain are handled by independent wholesalers and retailers, although some packers and processors undertake tea distribution as well.

TEA PRODUCTION AND MARKETING IN INDIA

In all aspects of tea production, consumption and export, India has emerged to be the world leader, mainly because it accounts for 31% of global production. It is perhaps the only industry where India has retained its leadership over the last 150 years. Tea production in India has a very interesting history to it. The range of tea offered by India - from the original Orthodox to CTC and Green Tea, from the aroma and flavour of Darjeeling Tea to the strong Assam and Nilgiri Tea- remains unparalleled in the world. India is the largest producer and consumer of black tea in the world. Tea is grown in 16 States in India, of which Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala account for about 96% of the total tea production. Tea originating from Darjeeling, Assam and Nilgiris are well known for their distinctive quality world over. While tea exports contribute a significant amount of foreign exchange into the country, tea also contributes revenue to the national exchequer by way of cess, sales tax, agricultural and corporate income tax, etc. More than two million people derive their livelihood from ancillary activities associated with the industry. The tea industry provides direct employment to more than a million workers, of which a sizeable number are women.

India is the largest producer and consumer of tea in the world, with a production of 853.7 million kilograms in 2008, roughly twice the combined production of its next two largest black tea competitors, Kenya and Sri Lanka. Its output roughly accounts for 30 per cent of world production and over 20 per cent of the output was exported. The year 2004 marks the completion of 170 years for the tea industry in India. At the global level, there is hardly any other single product category than tea in which India is not only the largest producer, but also one of the largest exporters. Though the share of India in global tea production has declined over the years, it still retains the status as the largest producer with 30% of the world output. Though India accounted for 45 percent of the world tea exports in the 1940s, the share of export from India started declining from the 1950s due to the rapid rise in the internal consumption of tea in the country. By 1998, the share of tea exports from India reduced to 17 percent of the world exports. Presently, India is the largest consumer of tea. Nearly 24% of the global production and almost three - fourths of India's total production is consumed in the country. Thus, tea plays a key role in the Indian economy.

The Indian Tea Board, which is under the control of the Ministry of Commerce, is the umbrella organization that regulates tea trading. The Tea Marketing Control Order passed by the Government provides the regulatory framework for processors and exporters of tea in the country. In India, tea is sold primarily through the auction system, and according to the Tea Marketing Control Order, until two years ago, 75 per cent of the total produce of plantations had to be sold through the auction process. However, in 2007, approximately 55 percent of the tea produced in the country was sold through auction and the remaining 45 per cent was sold directly. In the tea marketing system, there are three distinct communities, such as tea producers, registered buyers and tea brokers. Tea brokers are established by organizations that organize the auction system by acting as middlemen and assuring returns to the producer within a stipulated time. Generally, the two types of tea exporters are - producer exporters and merchant exporters. Producer exporters are those producers that export tea directly to their agents based in importing countries. Many of these

exporters are transnational companies such as Brooke Bond, Tetley and Unilever that deal in tea in various countries. Merchant exporters are intermediaries that do not grow tea. They are export houses that buy tea from producers or from auctions and sell it to their agents based in the markets abroad. Merchant exporters are involved in exports of tea and, in some cases, of other commodities as well.

USING THE INTERNET TO MARKET AGRICULTURAL EXPORTS

The possible use of the Internet in the marketing of agricultural exports can be considered along similar lines as the use of the Internet in the rest of the economy. While there are various types of online marketing models, the more commonly used ones are e-markets and online auctions. Online marketing can lead to reduced transaction costs, disintermediation or the emergence of new types of internet-based intermediaries, price transparency and the possible re-distribution of earnings along the supply chain. Like many other areas of economic activity, the marketing of agricultural commodities has witnessed widespread adoption of the internet. There are many business-to-business (B2B) e-markets dealing with agricultural and related commodities. Many of them engage in domestic trade, but there are also a good number in international exchanges. The available information shows that the internet is used widely by farmers to sell and advertise farm products, exchange information and buy farming inputs.

The two types of commonly used online marketing models are

1. E-Markets : E-markets have been used as marketing channels for agricultural commodities in such countries as Australia, Canada and the United States, where markets have been established for a wide range of commodities such as cotton, grain, soybeans, wood products, cattle, dairy products and a variety of other food products. In the various forms of online markets, transactions can be conducted in different ways, including the following:

- ✱ Offer/request e-market models where many sellers trade with many buyers. The buyers request quotes and the sellers provide price information;
- ✱ One seller deals with multiple buyers and pricing is dynamic through a bidding process.
- ✱ Sellers compete for the market of one buyer with dynamic pricing through bidding.
- ✱ Single buyers negotiate with single sellers, usually involving long-term contractual sales and
- ✱ Many-to-many transactions where prices are determined instantaneously through auction type bidding.

While e-markets largely focus on online trading or intermediating transactions, some tend to concentrate their functions on offering information and other value-added services.

If an industry is fragmented in the sense that there are many buyers and sellers, the e-market has better prospects of success, since the market creates value by aggregating the volume of trade in one trading platform, allowing buyers and sellers to discover each other more readily and to facilitate decisions on selling and buying. The agricultural industry, especially in developing countries, is highly fragmented, particularly on the sellers' side, and thus well suited to e-markets. Where a product is fairly standard, as many agricultural commodities are, online marketing is feasible since such products do not require customization for particular buyers' needs. However, where producers sell a commodity that has unique characteristics or is highly differentiated with regards to quality or other attributes, sellers may use e-markets but may prefer seller-driven marketplaces to open markets. The volume of the commodity traded on the marketplace should be large enough to ensure that the marketplace is viable. This means that there must be a minimum number of buyers and sellers participating in order to provide a critical mass that can sustain the viability and operations of the marketplace.

2. Online Auctions: Online auctions differ from e-markets in that they are one-off events and the participants do not retain an ongoing membership, as in e-markets. However, e-markets can use online auctions as one of the methods for organizing transactions between members. Quite a number of agricultural commodities, including many exported by developing countries, have traditionally been sold through floor-based offline auctions. Online auctions follow the same basic procedures as floor-based offline ones, although they provide benefits over traditional auctions. During an online auction, lot numbers are displayed on a website and buyers present bids that are shown to all participants. Buyers can see their bids on the screen or can check later via e-mail how their bids compare with those of other bidders. After the winning bid is determined, the auction manager facilitates the arrangements for payment and delivery. However, in some auctions, such arrangements are left entirely to the buyers and sellers, after the auction site has collected its fees from the participants. Some online auctions maintain strict confidentiality so that bidding, sales, payment and delivery are affected without revealing the identity of the seller or the buyer.

Online auctions may last from several hours to several days, depending on the volume of goods being auctioned. Like e-markets, online auctions take different forms such as independent auctions, where buyers and sellers use third-party auction sites, and private auctions, where sellers auction their own goods to invite buyers on their own auction sites. Some auction sites aggregate databases of a large number of other auction sites, thus enabling buyers to obtain information from many auctions through a single source.

BENEFITS OF E-MARKETS AND ONLINE AUCTIONS

✿ **Reduced Costs** : Use of the internet for marketing can reduce transaction costs in a number of ways. The first is the reduction of search costs. Agricultural marketing chains are characterized by multiple intermediaries and buyers spend much time searching for information about suppliers, products and prices. The internet may reduce search costs in terms of effort, time and money because information can be exchanged more efficiently via the internet than through traditional channels.

In e-markets, for example, a large number of agricultural commodity producers and buyers are brought together into a single trading community, which reduces search costs even further. Use of the internet can allow producers to match their products or planned production to the relevant “*specialty*” characteristics of the demand. It also allows prospective buyers to seek and exchange information with producers. Buyers can inform producers about the product characteristics that are most attractive to consumers, thus providing the producers with an indication of the demand.

✿ **Reduced Or Transformed Use Of Intermediaries** : The internet can reduce the use of intermediaries in the traditional supply chain by enabling producers to interact and transact directly with buyers. This is largely because producers and buyers can obtain trade information from each other and can carry out transactions at a much lower cost than in an offline supply chain with multiple intermediaries. Also, e-markets can be viewed as new intermediaries that can replace traditional offline intermediaries.

✿ **Price Transparency And Formation** : By bringing together large numbers of producers and buyers, e-markets reveal market prices and other transaction information to all parties. Increased price transparency reduces price differences prevailing in the marketplace. It also allows buyers to compare prices and make more informed purchasing decisions. Online auctions provide bidders the convenience of bidding from their home or office without necessarily being on an auction floor. Also, buyers can readily search databases containing large numbers of goods being auctioned instead of going through the printed listings of traditional auctions. Finally, online auctions are much cheaper to run than traditional ones, thus making it feasible for more goods, including very low-value goods, to be auctioned.

DISADVANTAGE OF E-MARKETS AND ONLINE AUCTIONS

The main disadvantage of online auctions is the difficulty faced by bidders in inspecting goods they want to buy. While this problem is being partly solved by sellers making available electronic images of the goods being auctioned, for some agricultural commodities, such as tea, tasting is an essential factor in the buyer's decision. However, in some instances, samples can be shipped in advance and tasting conducted offline. The results are then made available to prospective bidders in the auction.

ONLINE MARKETING OF TEA IN INDIA

Internet use by producers in India to market tea is still in its infancy, although some plantations have established websites linked to search engines and other commercial sites. Industry observers in India consider that more plantations might make use of the internet for direct marketing, if they were aware of the potential benefits. Major tea exporters are planning to use the internet to make deals and find business opportunities in external markets. For the time being, most of their existing business is conducted through stipulated agents. Also, majority of exports are in bulk; value addition in terms of blending, packaging and branding is undertaken mostly by importers in the consuming countries. Producers are largely dependent on auctions, and exporters are dependent on agents, partly as a way of managing risk. The auction system ensures payment to the producer within a stipulated time frame, while use of an agent ensures timely payment to the exporter. For exporters, their risk of return through export is taken care of by letters of credit and by export certifying agencies.

ONLINE TEA AUCTIONS IN INDIA

Tea trading in the domestic market is done in two ways, through both auction and private selling. Market reports are received from the six major auction centres in India, namely, Calcutta, Guwahati, Siliguri, Cochin, Coonoor, Coimbatore and www.Teauction.com. Bulk trading is done through the auctions held in these centres. Public tea auctions have always played a key role as the main vehicle for primary marketing of tea in India for over a century ever since the first tea auction centre was set up in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1861. Public tea auctions handle more than 500 million kilograms annually. While a large share of Indian tea exports are traded through traditional auctions, in recent years, some exports have been auctioned online. The newly designed e-auction system is being used by all the six auction centres - Kolkata, Siliguri, Guwahati, Cochin, Coimbatore and Coonoor. The various users of the system like manufacturers, warehouses, auctioneers and buyers have been provided with access to various functionalities of the system. Each auction centre will be entitled to carry out functions like registration, incorporation of changes in policy and information maintenance. The e-auction system integrates the process starting from creation of invoices till the delivery of tea from the warehouses, enabling better control and avoiding duplication of work, thus reducing time.

The auctioning of tea in India is being supervised by the Tea-Board of India. This has been achieved through the country's main online tea auction site, Teaauction.com, which was launched in 2000. Teaauction.com is a reverse B2B auction for Tea. Unlike traditional auctions, the buyer has to submit a RFQ (Request for Quotation) and then allow suppliers to place a soft bid on it. According to the site's operators, their auctions have led to savings in transaction costs amounting to ₹ 1.60 per kilogram in comparison with conventional auctions. Also, the transaction time has been shortened from eight weeks to one week. Within one year of its launching, Teaauction.com conducted 150 auctions, which accounted for 6 per cent of the total volume of tea auctioned in India. Overseas and local buyers such as Williamson Mago, Jayshree Tea, Nestle, Tata Tea and Tetley have participated in the auctions through their Indian agents.

According to observers, Teaauction.com has maintained a steady market volume over the last three years, approximately \$1.94 million. An auction takes place every Friday and the number of transactions per auction fluctuates considerably, from 10 to 100 lots per day. Encouraging is the fact that renowned teahouses like Tata Tea and Goodricke use the system. The site's owner indicated that there are 318 buyers and 110 producers registered with the site.

ASSESSMENT OF THE AUCTION'S PERFORMANCE

The system used by Teaauction.com is also being used, with considerable success, to auction tea online in Sri Lanka. It is believed that the Indian online auction would expand, given the various benefits of online auctions already observed in Sri Lanka. For buyers, an online auction provides better service without their needing to be physically present at the auction and the time from crop production to receipt of cash is reduced from eight weeks to four weeks. Also, the size of the sample required for auction purposes is reduced from 11 kilograms in a conventional auction to around 3 kilograms in an online auction. This is due to the fact that online auctions involve a predictable number of buyers, while in offline auctions, provision needs to be made for unexpected number of buyers.

PRICE COMPARISON WITH CONVENTIONAL AUCTIONS

Until now, the differences in prices between online and conventional auctions have been small, owing to the fact that the buyers involved in online auctions are also regular users of conventional auctions and have extensive knowledge of the prevailing prices for tea of various qualities. Many traders expect that online auctions will succeed once the constraints outlined above have been overcome. At the same time, they consider that producers must have a guarantee that their produce will be sold within a given time and that prices are not being unduly influenced by major cartels or big buyers. Also, the tea community's awareness of online auctions needs to be enhanced in a way that will reduce their concerns regarding the potential risks of online trading.

CONCLUSION

Agricultural exports play a key role in the economies of many developing countries, but the prices of these exports have in the last two decades experienced considerable declines that have negatively affected the incomes and well being of producers. An examination of the tea trade shows that the price declines result largely from an oversupply and

the existence of market structures that are buyer-driven, as producer countries have been losing their market power. The internet provides a window of opportunity for improving the marketing of agricultural exports in developing countries, as exemplified by the experience in India. Such use can generate significant benefits for producers in terms of reduced transaction costs and expanded market reach. Commodity such as tea is increasingly becoming differentiated as a result of changes in consumer demand. The growth of markets for specialty food depends heavily on the availability of information about what the producers can grow and what product characteristics are being demanded by consumers. The collection and dissemination of such information are complex and costly but can be greatly facilitated by the internet.

Internet auctions in the Indian tea trade are at their initial stages, but India's tea industry is optimistic that such auctions will become well established, especially after the current glut in tea markets comes to an end. There is consensus that a number of supportive measures such as awareness building and suitable trade facilitation systems are required for online trading to develop and grow. Since the production of tea is dominated by small farmers, and given the existing buyer-driven tea marketing structure, producers need to take measures that will give them the necessary capacity and critical mass to influence marketing arrangements, including the use of the Internet.

The market concentration that exists at various stages of the tea supply chains may be a major impediment to producers' adoption of the internet as a means of trading directly with consumers. In some cases, multinational companies engaged in food processing, labeling and packaging impose barriers to entry into such activities by producers in developing countries. The international community and Governments should address such forms of anti-competitive behaviour in their trade policies. Also, awareness of the scope and benefits of online marketing needs to be increased among government officials and producers. Support from Governments, international organizations and donors may play an essential role in providing the initial resources and trust needed to establish online marketing ventures, although in the long run, such ventures are the domain of the private sector.

Also, various stakeholders should support initiatives such as fair trade that are aimed at finding solutions to the agricultural commodity crisis faced by developing countries, a crisis that results partly from the marketing structures of the existing agricultural commodity supply chains. However, some of the underlying problems are caused by farmers' lack of access to market information and their resulting inability to bargain effectively. The development of commodity market information systems and the use of the internet by producers themselves and by the appropriate government departments can enhance market intelligence to the benefit of agricultural producers.

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