

HER CUP OF TEA

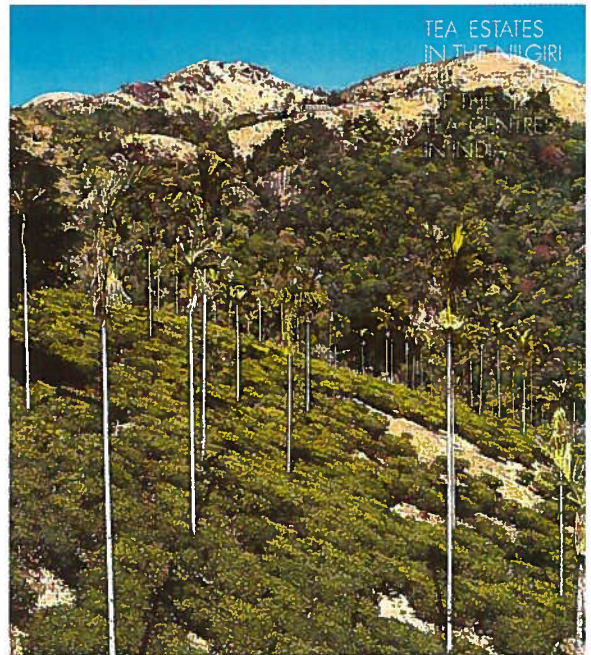
INDIA'S ONLY WOMAN TEA AUCTIONEER
MRIDUL TIWARI, TALKS OF THE UNUSUAL
CAREER SHE HAS CHOSEN

BACK in 1985, when I was a management graduate on the threshold of a new career, I somehow knew it would be in tea. And tea it was. I joined a tea company as a trainee broker, then became a buyer, and three years later, switched back to being a broker. Some firms are still too conservative to entrust tea auctions to women. I've been lucky in that my company, Paramount Tea, took that risk with me. I have been a broker/auctioneer since 1994 and have auctioned in all the six tea centres of the country. To the best of my knowledge, I am the only woman in my field of work.

LEARNING THE LEAVES

It's no sinecure, this job of mine. Tea is one of the few commodities that is sold, not in the open market, but through auctions. As a broker, I build up a client base consisting of big and small firms for my company. At present, I have between 35 to 40 clients, ranging from the biggies like Parry's and Harrisons Malayalam, to the small growers, known in tea parlance as 'bottley' companies. I have built up this client base through intense interaction, starting from the warehouse level and moving to the planter, grower, owner and management level.

My clients send their product — the tea — to a warehouse, from where I take samples, catalogue them and pass them on to the buyers. This way, the buyer knows just what he or she is bidding for, at the



PHOTOGRAPH: NANDU MANJESHWAR

WHEN BUYING TEA

You need to go by the taste, smell, texture, colour and aroma.

Use your hands: If the leaves still have moisture in them, they will not produce a strong brew.

Check for consistency: The leaves need to be well-formed with a minimum presence of stems, twigs, yellow leaves and jagged pieces. Yellow leaves signify that the tea has been adulterated with older leaves.

Colour and fragrance: The 'liquor', as it is called, must be clear and glisten green. Good tea should have a fresh fragrance — either fruity, malt-like or fiery-warm in nature.

auction. We have auction centres in Calcutta, Guwahati and Siliguri in the East and Cochin, Coimbatore and Coonoor in the South. Here, in Coonoor, we hold the auction every Thursday. About 50 to 60 buyers gather and bid, under the watchful eye and the alert hammer of the eight auctioneers, one of them being me.

TEA TALK

An auction, with its rapid-fire speech, can and does sound like gobbledygook to a layman; a speedy recital of numbers, and some handiwork with a compact wooden hammer. To those of us in the trade, it signifies the transfer of tea from the growers to the buyers and from there, to the wholesale market.

What does it take to conduct an auction? Well, clear bell-like tones, incredible speed (we do three lots of tea per minute!), eyes that dart in virtually all directions, registering bids and most important, the ability to be firmly, visibly and irrevocably in control. When I first ascended the auction dais in '94, I was a mass of nerves. Now I can and have handled as many as 200 buyers (in Calcutta), all aggressive and bent on striking the best deal they can.

GOING IT SOLO

It is not entirely comfortable, being the only woman auctioneer, but I have more or less trained myself to be indifferent to that. Luckily, this is one industry where the harassment is not sexually oriented — it cuts across the board! But seriously, I am given no quarter just because I am a woman. I am expected to do my job and do it well.

It can be an intimidating environment; a room full of men scribbling on the margins of catalogues, taking phone calls (cell bids) while gesticulating frantically, and when the bidding begins, men trying to talk you down to prices that suit them.

I work with a built-in disadvantage: Men can cut across all barriers to strike up instant rapports, but women have

to be more circumspect. But, I think I have done fairly well.

I've just finished an auction of tea dust this morning, and can state with some satisfaction that I managed to start bidding prices at pre-fixed levels rather than giving in to belligerent buyers, out to strike a bargain price. Sometimes, those who don't manage to get their own way with the bidding turn sulky. Then I lighten the atmosphere with a quick quip or two, like my take-off on KBC ('lock kiya jaaye'). At other times, I turn a blind eye to tantrums. Self-control is one vital pre-requisite of this job.

BRANCHING OUT

I don't need to emphasise that to be successful in this trade, you need to know your product — tea. I am also a tea taster, which in effect means I know just exactly what I am auctioning. As an auctioneer, I handle in the region of 10 to 15 million kilos of tea per year!

When I am not auctioning, I am tasting tea, evaluating it, meeting the buyers and growers and endeavouring to build a rapport with them. The more volume of tea you handle, the more successful you are.

IT PAYS TO LIKE TEA!

As professions go, I am aware that you cannot find anything more off the beaten track than tea auctioning. What advice do I have for aspiring tea auctioneers? Well, learn your trade and learn it well. Be prepared for very, very hard work; you will need to move to one of the six tea centres; to solicit and build up a client-base. You will have to deal with all kinds of people, from tea packers to managers, and face some unwitting intimidation with placidity. All said and done, this is no job for women with delicate constitutions.

Do I earn a lot of money? Well, enough to keep me happy, around Rs 20,000 to 25,000 per month in my current position. Do I like tea? Well, yes... but only if it's made really well!

(AS TOLD TO SHEILA KUMAR)

MRIDUL TIWARI IS A LONE WOMAN AT THE INDIAN AUCTIONEER'S TEA PARTY



DID YOU KNOW

* The leading tea centres of India are Calcutta, Siliguri and Guwahati in the East, and Cochin, Coimbatore and Coonoor in the South.

* Tea tasting is a highly specialised skill that is an intrinsic part of auctioning. The tea is first tasted, judged and valued by tasters before being auctioned.

* Tea auctions are like supermarkets that offer the buyer a variety in terms of quality and variety. Tea is also traded online.

* India is the largest tea grower in the world.