

Tea point



If you are an outdoor person with good managerial skills, you could consider becoming a tea estate manager, says Aruna Rathod

It was fate that got Ashok K Bhargava into the tea industry. "I belong to a family of bureaucrats - my grandfather and father were both in the IPS. My older brother was in the army, while the other was in the IFS and subsequently moved to the United Nations," begins Ashok Kumar Bhargava, managing director, Apeejay Tea Limited.

"We were brought up with strict discipline. Hailing from Rajasthan, my exposure to the corporate world was nil. I always moved with my parents in their circle of bureaucrat friends. However, many boys from my college and city had found jobs in the tea plantations. They always talked about being in the tea industry as a good, outdoor life, with tremendous hard work and space for fun and sports. My parents were not keen on me joining this industry. But I was fascinated after seeing some people who had joined tea companies and decided, against the wishes of my parents, to make a career in the tea industry."

Bhargava did his post-graduation from Rajasthan

University and went on to continue his education at London Business School. His father was keen that he do his civil services exams and Bhargava agreed to take the examination in civil services. "I decided that I would convince my parents later about taking up the tea industry career seriously. But it was difficult as I had no knowledge about tea and where and whom to approach."

So, armed with a reference letter from the late Jack Gibson OBE, Padmashree, the then Principal of Mayo College, Ajmer and with plenty of advice from his friends based in Calcutta and the corporate world, Bhargava set out for interviews in plantation companies. "I was thrilled when my wishes were fulfilled and I got a job after rigorous interviews," he recalls.

"My first job was as a trainee assistant manager in Empire Plantations, which was then a Sterling company and later taken over by Apeejay Surrendra Group to be part of Apeejay Tea Group. Before I joined the plantations, I had heard that I would be going to work on a

pony, play lot of games like polo, tennis, squash and golf. But that was not the case. I was given a cycle and my senior colleague who was responsible for crop and field practices was advised to take me around the garden, understand the nature of the work in the nursery.

Subsequently, I got involved in agriculture practices e.g. pruning, drainage, application of fertiliser and control on weed and pest. Over and above, I was put to work with the head clerk to understand budget and financial controls. Within a short span of time, I began to understand that a planter is the administrator, the social worker who oversees the hygiene at labour lines and hospitals, as well as the lawyer who solves grievances "bichar" of workforce within his plantation."

It was passion, that dedication and hard work, that led Bhargava to rise to the post of managing director of Apeejay Tea Group. "An educational background from either an agricultural university or a mechanical degree is helpful, as this covers both field and factory operations. "We have 17 tea estates

spread across 50,000 acres of plantations in Assam. One must have the know-how of the best agricultural practices required for this job, love one's land and care for it like all farmers do," concludes Bhargava.

cut out and keep

1 TEA ESTATE MANAGER

career

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

Tea is a labour-oriented industry and the manager is the head of the estate. He looks after the entire work force including the workers, staff, executives and their dependents in addition to the administration, operation, environment and community relationship. All activities are executed according to laid down policies and work plan. He has to develop and maintain cordial relationships with workers' union, associations, government authorities including the civil and defence forces. An estate has vast infrastructure, for e.g. - workers' housing, school, hospital, crèche, stores, vehicle, roads and bridges etc and it is the manager's duty to ensure that all functions carry on as required by the company.

CLOCK WORK

There is no time limit for a tea estate manager. He is at his job 24x7, be at field, factory, hospital, with visitors, government authorities, unions, association. A typical day starts at 6 am with half an hour break for breakfast and lunch. One can pack up days between 6.30 to 7.00 pm and be ready for the night

around 11.30 when manufacture starts. On Wednesdays and Saturdays all executives, along with interested spouses are normally expected to play their game of choice, to keep the mind fresh and also help in getting to know more people.

THE PAYOFF

At par with the best in other industries.

SKILLS

A tea estate manager does not get this designation until many years of service at most estates/companies. Earlier in the good old days, family background was a prime factor with integrity also being an important

virtue to get the job. Technical and agricultural know-how is needed. Since it is also a labour-oriented industry, interpersonal skills are an added advantage.

HOW DO I GET THERE?

A science graduate with TRA experience/agricultural industries/technical skills can get into tea after the required exam and interview.

INSTITUTES & URLS

Any Agriculture University, Tea Research Association (TRA) for Plantation, Indian Institute of

Plantation Management and technical knowledge of machinery.

PROS & CONS

■ The tea industry has become much more result-oriented and professional in its approach. You can work in a good environment that keeps you healthy and fit. The pay package is lucrative with a lot of other amenities and

luxuries. ■ The constraints are- lack of availability of better education for children and slightly remote locations. You have to be proactive in all aspects, especially man-management.