

REVITALIZING THE TEA SECTOR OF SRI LANKA

Dyan Seneviratne

Executive summary:

Renowned planter, Mr. Dyan Seneviratne, shares insights on the current challenges faced by the Sri Lankan tea industry in an interview. With over 40 years of experience, Mr. Seneviratne proposes a revival strategy focused on transformative changes. He highlights the need to discard outdated mindsets, embrace technology, and position plantations in the global value chain. Key issues include historical missteps, ineffective management structures, and the politicization of trade unions. Mr. Seneviratne advocates for professional training, modernization initiatives, and disciplined estate practices. The summary concludes with a call for a comprehensive transformation to restore the industry's vibrancy and global competitiveness.

Analysis of the Current State of the Plantation Industry

We recently had the opportunity to engage in a conversation with Mr. Dyan Seneviratne, a highly esteemed planter with over 40 years of experience in the cultivation and manufacturing of tea. Mr. Seneviratne has demonstrated exceptional leadership, achieved record yields and secured the highest selling prices for tea across various plantations under his guidance. In this interview, he shares valuable insights into the present challenges faced by the tea industry and provides recommendations for its revival.

Q: Is the Tea Industry of Sri Lanka dead now? Can it ever be resurrected?

Dyan: While the Tea Growing & Manufacturing sector faces considerable challenges, it is not beyond revival. I firmly believe that a restoration of its former glory is possible through necessary and practical transformative changes at all operational levels.

Q: Why do you focus on 'Tea Growing & Manufacture' specifically, excluding other stakeholders?

Dyan: The middle and end segments of the tea value chain continue to reap significant profits. Unfortunately, those involved in the laborious tasks at the plantation level receive disproportionately minimal returns. Neglecting the essential elements of soil, bushes, and the workforce could have cascading negative effects.

Q: As a 'Planter,' what advice do you offer to the Plantation leaders of Sri Lanka?

Dyan: It is imperative to discard the outdated 'Planter Mindset' to initiate a paradigm shift. Embracing modern technologies such as IT, implementing Enterprise Research Planning solutions, GPS monitoring, and efficient Management Information Systems (MIS) are essential. Additionally, incorporating alternative energy sources like solar panels, understanding global business trends, and positioning plantations as contributors to the global value chain are crucial. Exploring innovative products and engaging in agro-tourism can further enhance the industry's prospects.

Q: Can you pinpoint the reasons for the present challenges in the Tea Industry?

Dyan: Numerous factors have contributed to the current state of the industry. Some key issues include the ill-conceived nationalization of plantations in 1973, the dismantling of effective management structures in 1975, and the politicization of plantation trade unions. Other issues involve inadequate professional training, the presence of low-caliber managers, a lack of understanding of plantation culture, and the failure to embrace new technologies and global business trends.

Q: What measures can be taken to address these challenges?

Dyan: The industry must undergo a comprehensive transformation. Initiatives include establishing professional training colleges, investing in ongoing factory modernization programs, promoting disciplined estate-level practices, and focusing on global marketing strategies to showcase the uniqueness and health benefits of Ceylon Tea.

In summary, Mr. Dyan Seneviratne emphasizes the need for a holistic approach, incorporating technological advancements, global connectivity, and a shift in mindset to revive and sustain the Sri Lankan Tea Industry.

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