



From the garden to the cup

Bala Sarda, the founder and CEO of Vahdam Teas, talks about how his four-year-old company eliminates middlemen to bring freshest and best quality Indian teas to its clients worldwide.

Text * **Debarati Chakraborty**



WHEN BALA SARDA JOINED his 80-year-old family tea export business, he was appalled to see how teas passed through multiple middlemen and it took nearly 8-10 months for a pack of tea to reach the consumer, by which time its prime freshness and flavour were lost.

Having been tasting teas under his father's supervision for years, Sarda was introduced to different tea varieties even before he started his company, Vahdam Teas, and this not only piqued his interest in tea but also helped to tremendously understand the product side of the trade.

The business of tea

A crucial problem faced by Indian tea growers is that even though India produces some of the finest teas in the world, the absence of home-grown brands often forces the tea industry to be dependent on bulk tea exports to foreign brands. Such brands do not hesitate to shift to poor-quality teas from other tea growing regions and countries, in order to compete on price points and earn higher profit margins, as soon as farmers in India increase their prices. Sarda launched Vahdam Teas in 2015 to solve these problems and bring to the world the amazing teas that India has to offer.

"Our brand is the world's first vertically-integrated tea brand that takes garden-fresh teas straight to consumers," Sarda says. Vahdam's teas accordingly are sourced directly from India's choicest tea gardens and then made available to consumers in the shortest time possible by breaking the long chain of auction houses and middlemen. In doing so, the brand empowers hundreds of tea growers, as teas are procured directly from renowned plantations and independent tea growers in Darjeeling, Assam, Dooars, Sikkim, and the Nilgiri regions and within days

of harvest. The harvest is then brought to Vahdam's state-of-the-art tea facility in Delhi, where it goes through extensive sorting, blending and stringent quality checks. The processed teas are then packed in large vacuum-sealed bags and stored in a temperature-controlled environment, which protects them from moisture, oxygen and light and preserves their freshness and character.

Understandably then, the brand has seen increased number of takers with every passing year. "In the last four years, Vahdam has shipped millions of units to consumers in over 90+ countries," Sarda says. Consequently, Vahdam has come a long way and so has 28-year-old Sarda, his team having grown from 10 members to 125+ members. But the journey of transforming a novel vision into a successful business model was not without its share of challenges.

Overcoming challenges

A key challenge for Sarda in the early days was to establish the brand. Winning over customers' trust and gaining recognition as a home-grown Indian label were challenging too. Sarda's team overcame these by prioritising quality, bringing

*Facing page:
Bala Sarda,
Founder &
CEO,
Vahdam Teas
Right: Some of
Vahdam Teas'
products*



in transparency in the sourcing process, revolutionary packaging, ease of use and exceptional customer service.

The brand also had to build an overseas network and that brought a whole new set of challenges. "For instance, shipping of food items is governed by strict laws. As an e-commerce company, we don't have an importer. We are a non-resident importer company in all these countries," Sarda says.

Success in numbers

The brand has raised over ₹ 120 crore of venture funding from India's top consumer investors including Fireside Ventures, Sixth Sense Ventures, Mumbai Angel Network, Mankind Group Family office, Infosys co-founder Kris Gopalakrishnan, SAR Group Family office, Zomato co-founder Pankaj Chaddah and Urmin Group.

"The funds are being utilised for expanding and strengthening the company's hold over major international markets across the USA, UK, Europe, and now Asia too," Sarda says.

Plans are afoot to also launch a new line of superfood products and enter new, untapped markets in South East Asia, India and the UAE. The company's headquarters are in New Delhi, while it has a second office in New York. According to Sarda, the brand also plans to establish an office in the UK in 2020 and further invest in a state-of-the-art packaging facility in Delhi to expand manufacturing, in order to cater to the ever-increasing demand.

To give back to the tea growers of India, Vahdam Teas launched its social initiative 'TEAch Me' in 2018. The group



Top: Bala Sarda with a tea garden worker, inspecting tea leaves

directs one per cent of its revenue towards the education of the tea growers' and labourers' children in India. "We are very passionate about working on issues like education and want to ensure our farmers build a better and sustainable future for themselves," Sarda says.

Roots in Rajasthan

Born and raised in Delhi, Sarda traces his roots to Rajasthan. His father, however, was born and raised in Darjeeling, in West Bengal, where his grandfather had established his tea business. After marriage, he settled in Delhi though.

Now a successful young entrepreneur, work commitments don't allow Sarda to visit his native town as often as he would like to. But he says he loves Rajasthan and visits his home state at least twice a year. "I guess the colorful sights, the unmatched hospitality and the rich culture keeps calling me back," he says with a smile and signs off. ✨

Bottom left: Children of tea garden workers at school, as part of the 'TEAch Me' initiative
Bottom right: Bala Sarda showcasing some of the premium teas from the Vahdam stable

Awards and Accolades

- Vahdam's Black Teas, Chai Teas and herbal tisanes have won Gold, Bronze and Judge's Choice awards in the Global Tea Championships, bagging five awards in 2018 and three in 2019.
- Both Turmeric Spice Herbal Tisane and Blooming Rose Herbal Tea have won the renowned SOFI Awards (Specialty Food Association, USA) in 2018 and 2019.
- Several loose-leaf and tea bag blends have bagged Great Taste Awards in 2019.
- Turmeric Spiced Herbal Tisane Tea bags was a finalist in the World Beverage Innovation Awards in 2018.
- This year, Vahdam Teas was chosen by pop icon Mariah Carey as one of her 'Favorite Gift Items'.
- Bala Sarda has been on the prestigious Forbes 30 under 30 Asia 2018 list, Entrepreneur 35 Under 35 for 2019 list and has been invited to speak at Harvard University.

