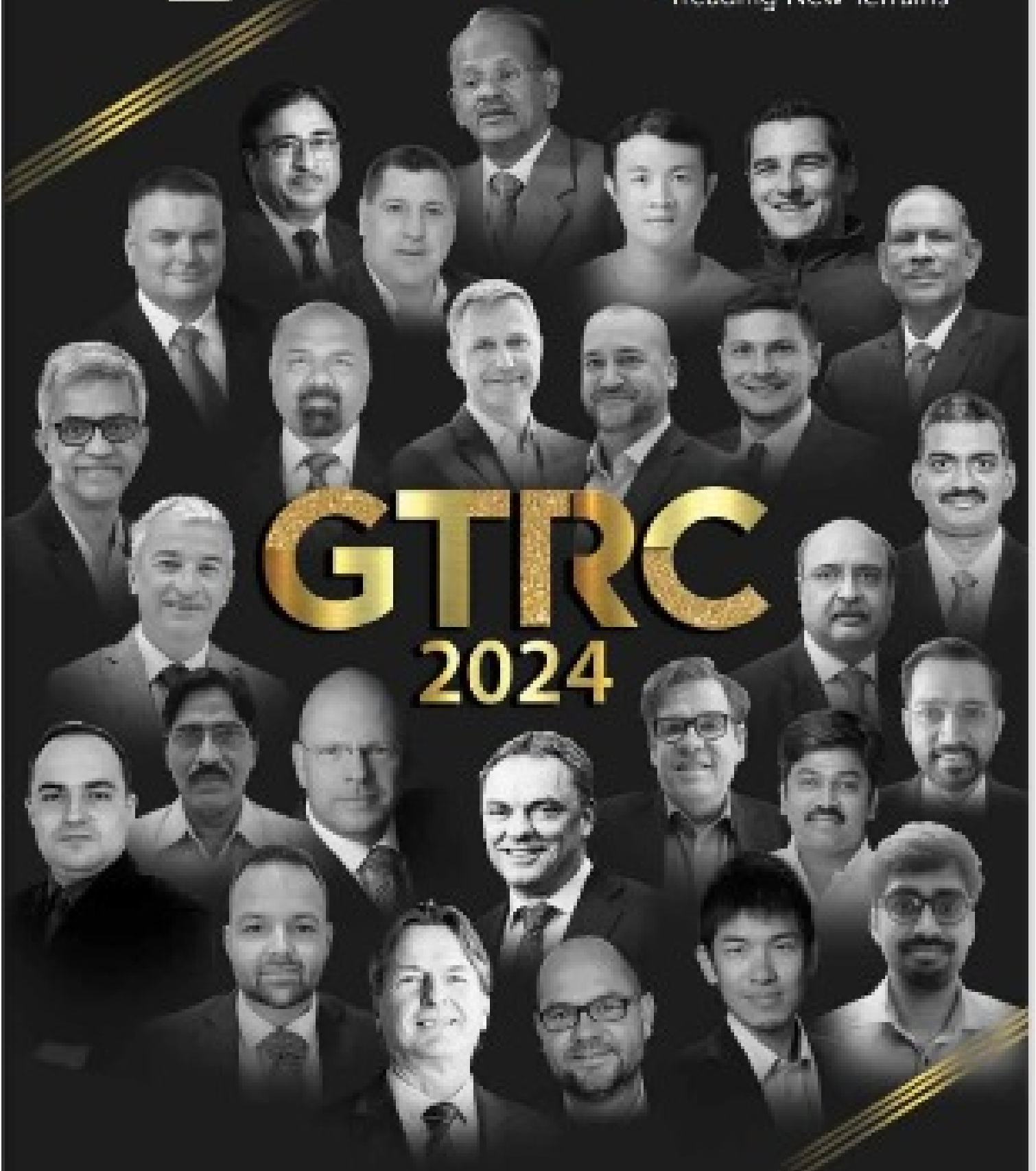


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Q & A

By Gaurav Nandi

EMPOWERING THE RUBBER INDUSTRY

All India Rubber Industries Association (AIRIA) President Shashi Singh continues to empower small-scale players to upgrade working knowledge and equip them with the expertise to develop world-class products.



Shashi Singh, President, AIRIA



What are your primary goals and how do you plan to achieve it?

My primary focus is to empower small-scale member. Recognising that individual businesses lack resources; the association will prioritise upgrading members' knowledge through technical courses and seminars.

Skill development initiatives are already underway with a three-year rubber course offered at the Bandra Polytechnic serving as an example. Similar programmes are planned for Pune and IIT Kharagpur. Additionally, monthly lectures are being established in collaboration with ABCD Polymers to bridge the gap between theory and practical application for end users.

These efforts aim to equip members with the expertise to develop world-class products and compete in the international market. The association is also planning to establish a Centre of Excellence, a first-of-its-kind

facility envisioned to showcase rubber industry operations and provide members with hands-on learning opportunities. The inaugural centre is planned for Maharashtra, with subsequent centres envisioned for North and South India. Discussions are ongoing with government agencies to secure land for the swiftest possible establishment.



How do you plan to enhance collaboration and communication between the industry and government?

The association has advocated for several policy changes with the government and industry stakeholders. Key requests include the removal of the inverted duty structure, a uniform Goods and Services Tax regime and the encouragement of domestic production of raw materials currently not manufactured in India.

Additionally, the association has urged the government to eliminate duties on Free Trade Agreements, arguing that Indian manufacturers are well equipped to compete globally. Furthermore, we have called for modifications to a section of the Income Tax Act and infrastructure development to streamline the transportation of rubber produced in regions like Kerala and Tripura to other parts of the country.

We have also emphasised the need for a robust supply chain to facilitate efficient movement of goods. While other policy changes are desired, these represent the most pressing concerns. The association also highlights the importance of increasing export incentives, establishing research and development facilities and revising labour policies.



What advancements in farming techniques and technology are needed for increased productivity?

India's rubber production currently stands at 1,300 kg per hectare, highlighting the need for advancements in the sector. A key area for improvement lies in skilled manpower. Untrained tappers, the individuals who harvest latex from the trees, can hinder yield potential. To address this challenge, the Rubber Chemical Polymer Skill Development Corporation (RCPSDC), a joint initiative by AIRIA, the Automotive Tyre Manufacturers Association and the government, is

providing crucial training programmes for tappers. These programmes go beyond basic skills and aim to instil a mindset focused on maximising output from existing cultivated areas.

This focus on both technical expertise and yield optimisation signifies a multi-pronged approach to bridge the yield gap in India's rubber production.



What initiatives are you taking to promote sustainable farming methods?

The Indian rubber industry is embracing a new approach to sustainability with the development of furniture made from rubberwood. Traditionally, rubber trees are planted with a seven-year lead time before latex production begins, followed by a productive lifespan of around 30 years. However, after this period, the trees cease to produce latex, raising the question of their continued value. If no economic benefit is derived from these mature trees, farmers are less likely to replant, hindering new plantation growth.

This is where rubberwood furniture steps in. A recent collaboration between the Rubber Board and AIRIA has led to the development of a process that transforms used rubber trees into high-quality wood suitable for furniture making. This not only provides a valuable economic incentive for farmers to maintain their plantations but also fosters a sustainable cycle of rubber production and utilisation.

The RCPSDC is actively involved in this initiative as they offer training in the proper processing methods to ensure that the rubberwood is converted into a durable and aesthetically pleasing material for furniture creation.



What specific strategies is the industry employing to mitigate the effects of price fluctuations and market volatility?

India's rubber sector faces a confluence of challenges. Unpredictable monsoon patterns disrupt tapping processes, contributing to price fluctuations. Additionally, rising demand from China, a major consumer, exerts further upward pressure on prices.

Recognising these issues, the government is implementing measures to stabilise prices and boost domestic production. Initiatives

include subsidies of INR 7.08 billion over two years to support natural rubber plantations and promote farmer livelihoods. The Kerala Rubber Board is also playing a part by introducing export promotion subsidies. These efforts aim to reduce India's dependence on rubber imports and achieve self-sufficiency in the long run. However, price volatility might persist due to external factors.



What are the current challenges of the industry?

Despite government initiatives offering significant rebates for participating in exhibitions like the India Rubber Expo, many small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in the industry remain unaware of these benefits. AIRIA acknowledges this knowledge gap and actively works to bridge it.

AIRIA highlights the limitations faced by MSMEs, which are often product-driven with limited manpower. The burden of paperwork associated with claiming these incentives can be a hurdle. The association offers support to its members, assisting them in navigating the process and maximising their participation in such beneficial programmes.



How is AIRIA contributing to research and development?

The rubber industry thrives on continuous innovation. With a complex mix of 10-15 raw materials involved in creating rubber compounds, ongoing research and development is crucial for success. Recognising this, rubber companies prioritise significant investments in R&D activities. This ensures they remain at the forefront of the industry, developing new and improved products to meet evolving market demands and maintain a competitive edge.



What steps is the association taking to boost the industry?

AIRIA actively promotes knowledge sharing and technological advancement within the sector. Initiatives include hosting technical seminars, conducting sustainability workshops and organising events like the recent India Rubber Expo. Notably, the Expo's Reverse Buyer-Seller Meet (RBSM)

facilitated direct interaction between members and potential partners, fostering collaboration and technology transfer.

Recognising the potential for growth, AIRIA advocates for government support through schemes like the Production Linked Incentive programme. It proposes establishing MSME clusters that can leverage the PLI benefits to enhance competitiveness and drive innovation within the domestic rubber industry.



How do you plan to increase the competitiveness of the Indian rubber industry at the global stage?

AIRIA has partnered with the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur. This collaboration provides technical lectures and training programmes for rubber industry professionals, equipping them with the latest knowledge and skills.

Furthermore, AIRIA actively promotes export opportunities for its members. The RBSM events, held during exhibitions, connect Indian manufacturers with potential buyers from foreign industries. These facilitated meetings foster collaboration and create valuable export channels for Indian rubber companies.



How do you envision the future of the rubber industry in the next five years?

The future of India's rubber industry appears promising. The concept of 'China Plus One', where companies seek to diversify their manufacturing bases beyond China, presents a significant opportunity for India. With its established rubber production and growing capacity, India is well positioned to attract these investments.

AIRIA acknowledges this potential and is actively working to enhance the industry's competitiveness. Their efforts in knowledge sharing, technological advancements and export promotion initiatives all contribute to a positive outlook.

However, some challenges remain. Uncertainties like fluctuating rubber prices and the need to bridge the skill gap require ongoing attention. Nevertheless, India's rubber industry demonstrates a strong foundation for future growth, and with continued focus on innovation and collaboration, it can become a major global player in the coming years. ■