

‘JNCH observes a truly open-door policy’

Vivek Johri, IRS,
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Mr Vivek Johri, Chief Commissioner of Customs, Jawaharlal Nehru Custom House (Mumbai Zone II), *Nhava Sheva, joined the Indian Revenue Service (Customs and Central Excise) in 1985 and has since held positions both in the field as well as the Board. He has been involved in the preparation of as many as 16 Union Budgets and has also handled work relating to tariff negotiations at the WTO as well as several Preferential or Free Trade Agreements. He was posted as Minister (Customs) at the Permanent Mission of India to WTO in Geneva between 2012 and 2016 and prior to the current assignment was Principal Commissioner of Customs, Air Cargo Complex, New Delhi. He elaborates on the key role of JNCH at JN Port in an interaction with **Exim India**.*

Firstly, can you give our readers a brief about your career as an IRS officer and your journey to your current position?

I joined the Indian Revenue Service in 1985 after completing a BA (Hons) in Economics from St Stephens' College, Delhi University. In a career spanning 33 years, I have held a variety of assignments ranging from field formations of Customs and Central Excise to policymaking in the Tax Research Unit where I spent almost half of my career. Prior to my posting at Nhava Sheva, I held charge of Principal Commissioner of Customs at Air Cargo Complex, Delhi.

It has been quite an exciting journey involving a lot of hard work and enormous exposure and learning. I have been fortunate to work closely with many colleagues and seniors with sharp minds, clear vision and above all, the right values. It has also been a privilege to work directly on the reform process at different stages of my career.

Revenue-wise, how did JNCH fare in 2017-18 compared to the previous year? Did the zone surpass the set target? What is the target for the current fiscal?

Nhava Sheva Customs Zone collected a total net revenue of Rs 70,979.14 crore during the year, which represents a growth of 45.56% over 2016-17. We exceeded the target by almost Rs 18,500 crore. The target for the current fiscal is awaited.

You took charge in July last year. How has the experience been heading the largest revenue-earning Custom House in the country? What have been some of the challenges?

It is indeed a great privilege professionally. It is both exciting





and challenging. The sheer scale, volumes and diversity of issues are overwhelming. The canvas is very large. It also means that there is a tremendous opportunity to improve things.

The biggest challenge is to improve our service delivery to importers and exporters while remaining alert about corruption, evasion, smuggling and fraud. This requires that we improve the ownership and 'buy-in' for EoDB, trade facilitation, fairness and speed of disposal at all levels internally; encourage honest feedback from stakeholders; work constantly to improve inter-agency coordination and address both the size and quality of human resources.

What are some of the key trade facilitation measures JNCH has taken in the recent past?

The initiatives at JNCH are very much a part of those taken at the national level in the form of the Trade Facilitation Action Plan. The important ones are: further expansion of the Direct

Port Delivery and Direct Port Entry schemes; increase in the percentage of advance filing of bills of entry; further growth in the number of importers, exporters and logistics providers accredited under the Authorised Economic Operators (AEO) Program; mandatory use of e-Sanchit for submission of documents with bills of entry; e-sealing of export containers; regular interaction with stakeholders through the Permanent Trade Facilitation Committee and the Customs Clearance Facilitation Committee (CCFC). In addition, at Nhava Sheva we have ensured nil drawback pendency for many weeks at a stretch and accelerated disposal of IGST refunds.

How has the continuously growing DPD initiative changed the functioning of Customs here? How have you ensured its smooth implementation?

Continuous growth in DPD implies that Customs have to increasingly take a proactive lead in inter-agency coordination at the port to remove roadblocks and procedural bottlenecks in the working of this scheme. This also releases energy and resources for focusing on the high-risk consignments. It has been possible to implement DPD smoothly because of the support of other agencies (especially port authorities) and also because we have been receptive to suggestions and responsive in resolving problems. As soon as any problem was reported, we tried to find an immediate solution in consultation with the stakeholders.

What is the scenario regarding AEO status holders at JNCH?

We have received a large number of applications for AEO status - almost 900 - in the second half of March and early

April. These are being processed. We have also conducted several outreach programs with potential AEO clients to apprise them of the benefits that they can avail of. The AEO Cell has also been guiding importers/exporters and others in completing the documentation and in making their internal systems compliant with AEO standards.

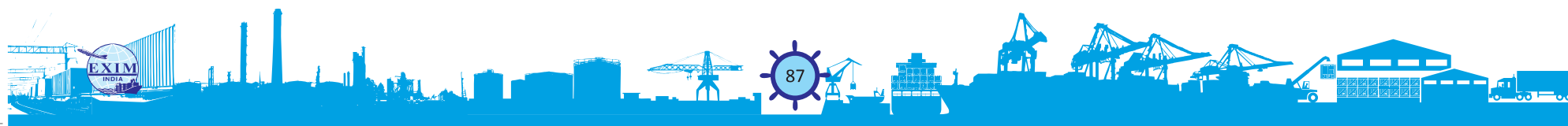
Simultaneously, work has also commenced on sensitising officers and staff about the type and level of facilitation that should be made available to AEOs.

With the first phase of the new mega terminal becoming operational this year, has it increased the pressure on your department? There is also a port-based SEZ expected to be up and running in the immediate future. Are you adequately staffed here to handle all your responsibilities?

Yes, there is a staff shortage at all levels while work is expanding at JNCH. The new terminal has commenced operations but will take a while to come up to speed. In the meanwhile, we have taken up the matter.

One has heard from port stakeholders about some issues regarding PCS- uploading of relevant data, etc. Could you throw some light on this? What are the steps being taken at your end to alleviate these problems?

The Port Community System is an electronic portal for exchange of information between the port terminals, Container Freight Stations, Customs and the shipping lines, etc. It is managed by the Indian Ports Association and not Customs. So I would not be in a position to comment.



How has JNCH been using technology to facilitate the trade?

Among the local initiatives taken at JNCH, the most important one is the use of the website as a channel of communication with the trade and other stakeholders. The website is fully updated and contains the entire body of Public Notices or Facilitation Notices issued from time to time. This ensures transparency in our working and allows the trade to remain fully updated about the changes in law or procedure. Likewise, social media is being used extensively to disseminate information as also to receive valuable feedback from the trade. Almost all manual communications have been replaced with e-mails.

Last year, we launched a refund module to digitise the process of refunds. As part of this initiative, we have also introduced a sms-seva to keep claimants updated about the status of their refunds.

A high-capacity, state-of-the-art drive through X-ray scanner is being installed close to JNCH. In addition, there are proposals to install mobile scanners at all terminals and a rail scanner too. The drive through would commence operations within the first half of this year. This would significantly enhance our capacity to scan containers and hopefully reduce the need for physical examination of cargo.

Does JNCH have an open-door policy to sort out the issues being faced by the trade? How often do you formally interact with the trade through events like Open House, etc.?

Yes, team JNCH observes a truly open-door policy. I do not insist on prior appointments too and readily meet people from

the trade, Customs brokers and other stakeholders to hear their problems and resolve them. I encourage people to send their queries, complaints, feedback and suggestions through e-mail. They are welcome to share these with me on the phone as well. All channels of communication are thus open. There are three aspects that I exhort my team to follow in interacting with the trade: safai (physical cleanliness of the office and maintenance of integrity); sunwai (patient hearing to anyone with a grievance) and karyavahi (suitable and prompt action to resolve that grievance).

Formal interaction with the trade happens through monthly meetings of the PTFC and bi-monthly meetings of the CCFC. The minutes of these are recorded and circulated. On specific issues, we also hold special meetings, workshops and outreach programs.

How do you keep your officers motivated and committed to striking the right balance between regulation and facilitation?

The key lies in communicating regularly and openly. I have clearly spelt out the organisation's expectations from officers and staff in written communications that I have addressed to them from time-to-time. I reiterate and remind them of these frequently. As a team leader, it is my duty to also provide them the right enablers - good physical infrastructure, appropriate training and skill development, prompt grievance redressal, appreciation and reward for good performance and zero tolerance for wrongdoers. There are several good proposals that the team has come up with in this regard, including the formation of a training cell in my office to identify the training needs of officers and staff and



to organise training programs. I encourage the team to make suggestions to improve our working and efficiency.

How do you see JNCH evolving over the coming years?

It is natural to expect it to grow in size and complexity. But my dream is for it to be the best Custom House in terms of knowledge-base, professionalism and service delivery.

What would be your message to the trade?

We exist because of the trade. The government accords a very high priority to trade facilitation and EoDB. I urge importers, exporters and Customs brokers to come forward and avail of the initiatives and schemes for this purpose - AEO, DPD, DPE, advance filing, etc. The new paradigm is trust-based. They must ensure that the trust is not breached. At the same time, they must demand ever higher service standards from us, blow the whistle on corruption or any wrongdoing and to keep providing honest feedback. ■

