as 180 Customs Administrations across the globe, being members of the World Customs Organization (WCO) organize various national events and celebrate International Customs Day on 26th January every year. As 26th January is devoted to Republic day celebrations, a suitable date is generally fixed after 26th January for celebrating the International Customs Day. It has been decided that this year the International Customs Day shall be celebrated on Wednesday, the 27th January 2016 by Indian Customs.

International Customs Day - significance of 26th January

World Customs Organization (WCO) is an independent intergovernmental body. It was inaugurated on 30th January 1962 in which India has become an independent nation that thirteen European Countries representing the Committee for European Economic Co-operation set up the Study Group. In the year 1948 this Group set up two committees- one Economic Committee and another Customs Committee. These are:

1. Organisation for Economic Co-operation(OECD) and
2. Customs Committee -the Customs Co-operation Council (CCC)

The Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OECE) reformed into the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The second one, Customs Co-operation Council (CCC), was formally established in 1912, and the inaugural official Session of the Council was held in Brussels, Belgium on 26th January 1912 with the participation of representatives of 17 countries. Thus, it was 26th January the day on which the inaugural Session of the Council was held was celebrated as International Customs Day every year. It was nearly 40 years later, in 1994, Customs Co-operation Council (CCC), adopted a new name World Customs Organization (WCO).

The World Customs Organization (WCO) permits legitimate international trade to effectively act as a tool for economic development. WCO chooses, every year a specific theme and slogan to mark the progress of its member Customs administrations. Accordingly, this year the WCO has decided to dedicate International Customs Day, 26th January, 2016 to the 'Digital Customs' theme with the slogan ‘Progressive Engagement.’

The following list of themes with the slogans indicates the commitment of Customs Administration for an improvement:

2009 - ‘Customs and the environment: protecting our natural heritage’
2010 - ‘Customs and Business: improving performance through partnerships’
2011 - ‘Knowledge, a catalyst for Customs Excellence’
2012 - ‘Borders divide, Customs connect.’
2013 - ‘Innovation for Customs progress.’
2014 - ‘Communication: sharing information for better cooperation’.
2015 - ‘Coordinated Border Management: an inclusive approach for connecting stakeholders’.
2016 - ‘Digital Customs: Progressive Engagement.’

Digital Customs: This year, 2016 will be dedicated to promoting the digitalization of Customs processes under the slogan “Digital Customs, Progressive Engagement.”

The concept of the theme with slogan was explained by the Secretary General of the WCO, Sri. Kuniiro Mikuriya, that WCO Members will have the opportunity to showcase and further promote their use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

The term Digital Customs means the electronic activity that contributes to the effectiveness, efficiency, and coordination of Customs activities. It includes automated clearance systems, the Single Window concept, the electronic exchange of information, websites to communicate information and promote transparency. It is a matter of fact that, in India, Indian Customs in the recent years, marched towards digitalization and this has transformed the way Customs operates. Indian Customs continuous efforts ensured progression - the enhanced ability of Customs to manage process clearances, receive and exchange information, and to promote transparency.

Customs progress in Digitalisation over the years, Indian Customs liberalised the procedures and introduced electronic mode of processes (implemented in Visakhapatnam Customs during 1998) where-in entire process of assessment and clearance is done on system on the basis of electronic declarations. Even in EDI clearances, the physical verification inspection examination continued. In 2005, Customs department, further liberalised the procedures and implemented Risk Management System (RMS) in Imports which has been one of the most significant steps in the ongoing Business Process Re-engineering initiative of the department. Introduction of Risk Management System (RMS) in imports during 2005, changed the whole clearance process completely. Accordingly, the importers/exporters can make declarations regarding classification, value and the Electronic Data Interchange Systems processes the bill for assessments on the basis of these self-declarations. Duty is assessed in less than three minutes on the basis of the declarations and the Challan indicating the amount of customs duty is generated. The duty amount indicated has to be paid through online banking system and then importers/exporters to proceed to the Customs area (port/CFS/ Airport) for presenting the documents and for obtaining the clearance from Customs. The RMS procedure was also extended to Exports during 2013. The Indian Customs : One of the major significant feature of 26th January is, the WCO chooses, every year, a specific theme and slogan to mark the progress of its administrations. Indian Customs has decided to promote transparency.

Some of the significant IT initiatives by Indian Customs:

- E-filing of Bills for Import/Export, IGM/EGM with electronic acknowledgements
- Connectivity with 17 types of Stakeholders such as Custodian, Port Authorities, Shipping Lines, Airlines, Customs Brokers, DGFT, Banks and other Government Agencies, through electronic messages. This eliminates the need for paper movement across agencies and access locations.
- Facility of electronic payment of Customs duties
- Selective appraisement and examination through the Risk Management System
- Document processing on a First-Come-First-served basis and tracking facility status
- Direct credit of Drawback to exporters bank accounts.
- Introduction of Centralized Bond Management and elimination of Transfer Release Advice (TRA) enabling trade to file bond at any location and effect clearance from any other location.
- Electronic transmission of Shipping Bills to DGFT and online receipt of licences
- Round the clock Helpdesk with toll-free number
- Automated Recording and Targeting System (ARTS) to promote the protection of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR)
- Apart from the above, Indian Customs has introduced several measures indicating the progress in digitalization of processes.

Adoption of Digital Signature: in order to find out the status of export clearances, SMS- Query and answering system has been introduced at four major places - Delhi Airport Cargo, Bangalore Customs, Jawahar Customs and Sahar Airport Cargo. This is likely to be introduced at other locations in near future. For more details, trade may visit http://www.cbec.gov.in/hidocs/cbec/query.html.

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Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS): a software package to facilitate the Customs Brokers / Importers/Exporters in preparation of Bill of Entry and Shipping Bill declarations in the format acceptable to ICES for submission at Customs House through ICEGATE. (For more details, trade may visit http://www.cbec.gov.in/hidocs/cbec/faq/)

Help mail: CBEC provided Questions (FAQ) on its website at http://cbec.gov.in/hidocs/cbec/faq and relevant statutory Sections of The Central Excise Act, 1944 to check if the answer to their queries are available there before sending the query to the designated officers. For the queries relating to Customs matters such as Customs Tariff, Customs Procedure, Customs Tariff Schedule, Drawback & Export Promotion etc, the details of officers designated are given at http://cbec.gov.in/hidocs/cbec/helpdesk.

Trade / Industry is also expected to equip themselves with the modern facilities so as to have a smooth integration with Customs processes. With a new hope for prosperity in the New Year 2016, let us all hope for the best and support for the progress of development in the international trade processes being initiated by Customs.

(The writer is Assistant Commissioner of Customs (Capacity Building & Outreach Programme), Visakhapatnam (Vizag). Please send your comments to jm_kishore@gmail.com or info@vican.is.)