



Tea Trails

THE PLANTERS SOCIETY OF EASTERN INDIA

I take this opportunity to wish you and your family a very happy 2019.

As you are all aware, after the last AGM held in September, I have taken over as the president of your Society from Mr Deepak Atal. He led the Society from the front for the last three years and brought in many new initiatives, thereby making it vibrant and participative. The starting of medical fund has been a very thoughtful scheme and was well-received by the members. You will all agree that getting into his shoes is not an easy task, but I count on your support to carry forward the work started by him and to make the Society a great platform for the planting fraternity and for the various other stakeholders. I am fortunate to have the wise counsel of Mr C S (Gulu) Bedi who was elected vice president. I have no doubt that I will continue to get valuable guidance from the committee members.

It is with great pleasure we present the sixth edition of Tea Trails. The editorial committee is tirelessly working together to make it regular and contemporary. In this edition, we are featuring an interview with Mr Gulab Vasvani, a doyen of the tea industry. The events of the Society have been rolling as per plan. The rain dance, a fun filled evening, was held in July 2018 at the Masonic Lodge. The AGM at Tolly club, held in September,

was well attended. Also, we were finally successful in releasing the updated Gunti book which is already with you. I heartily thank all well-wishers, friends and sponsors, who were forthcoming with their financial support. We have received good response from various stakeholders for advertisements in the Tea Trails.

PSEI needs your help and participation

For the upcoming season, we have three to four social functions lined up, starting with a river cruise, which we successfully took on the 9th of February and will keep you updated about the others, closer to the event.

Our website www.planterssociety.com has been updated. I would like you to visit the same and give your valuable inputs. Tea Trails and Gunti book is uploaded on the site. Thanks to Anurag Singh and Brenda Dennis for helping us in this regard.

Planters Society of Eastern India needs your help and participation to thrive and prosper. The editorial team would welcome your contributions, by way of articles, photographs, anecdotal features, etc.

Warm personal regards,

Sunil Munshi

President





Dear readers ,

Tea Trails provides an opportunity to talk about the plantation life of yesteryears and recent times and to form a platform for exchange of opinions and tea experiences.

The Vasvani partnership of over fifty years and Krupa David's narrative of events and anecdotes that most of the planters can relate and connect to emotionally, must be read and enjoyed!

We have completed a couple of years doing it and there are promising signs; we could reach even beyond, through the constant support of our members and also with the intellectual generosity of our readers and contributors. I thank Brenda Dennis for her whole hearted support and invaluable assistance.

Our website plantersociety.com is up and running for anyone to see. There is a blog space for anyone to put up a blog or share thoughts on their tea living.

Please come forward with your inputs and suggestions.

Anju Munshi, *Editor*

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Editorial Board:

Anju MUNSHI | Brenda DENNIS



When I handed over charge – on completion of a three year term – to Sunil Munshi on 14th September 2018 I did so in the strong belief that a younger and more energetic individual will take our Planters Society to great heights. With the veteran Gulu Bedi agreeing to serve as Vice President, PSEI is in very good hands. Our strength of members has grown and so has the popularity of events. The River Cruise organized so meticulously by Sunil and his Team on 9th February was a resounding success.

I believe the Planters Society of Eastern India is a great forum for retired and senior planters to meet members of the fraternity and interact with current crop of people connected with the Industry. It brings back such happy memories for all of us.

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I was privileged to serve as President following the footsteps of some great stalwarts. My Committee ensured timely completion of Accounts and Taxation formalities, launched the Bulletin *Tea Trails*, the Gunti Book for ready reference and last but not the least the Medical Welfare Fund which slowly and steadily continues to grow. I acknowledge my thanks to my Committee for their whole hearted support and specifically to Sunil Munshi, Ajay Singh, Swapan Dutta, Dilip Moitra, Anju Munshi and Brenda Dennis. Best wishes to Sunil and his Team. There is a lot to look forward to.

Deepak Atal

Outgoing President

Thank You! We acknowledge with thanks the support of

- Goodricke Group
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- Laxmi Tea Company
- Mr Victor Banerjee, Mr R K Ghosh
- Mrs Uma Mahajan, Mr Rajiv Puri
- Mr Subir Das & Mr J S Kandal

for their contribution to the Planters' Welfare Fund

The Good Old Days

In conversation with **Gulab & Pushpa Vasvani**



Seeking one's personal vision with hard work and a strong resolve, being a tea taster to the core, fitting in fun along with heavy work responsibilities, socializing on the clock- this is Mr Gulab Vasvani, a tea master, a great human being, blessed with a great sense of humour.

Meet Gulab and his wife Pushpa Vasvani. Tucked away in a well done, cute apart-

ment on Kolkata's Mayfair Road, married happily for more than fifty years, they have an energy that flows through their open hearts. They radiate happiness with effervescence; they narrate incidents and anecdotes with a fondness that is so typical of people who have lived wonderful lives. Acting with compassion is their special gift as the couple is more interested in facilitating someone else's pleasure than seeking

satisfaction for themselves. No lingering negativity, no regrets, they have a penchant for crisp and clever wit, subtle and rib-tickling personal incidents, jokes that make one acknowledge that pleasure is just around the corner.

Early years ...

Gulab Vasvani started his professional journey with McLeod Company as an assistant manager. After working for some years, he came across an advertisement of Brooke Bond Co for their tea tasting department. Gulab decided to join the same and did so around 1944. He joined Brooke Bond as a trainee, worked roughly for six years during which time he was sent to Coimbatore to learn about south Indian tea making and to attend the auctions in Cochin. South Indian teas are different in quality and Brooke Bond had some special process those days, to improve the colour in their tea blend, says Gulab.

In 1962 he resigned from Brooke Bond and got a job with Tata Finlay. Five years later he shifted to Jardine Henderson's tea garden department, as a manufacturing advisor for quality improvement. During this period he was able to improve the quality of teas at their gardens. He was successful because he never criticized the managers but motivated them, worked with them, sometimes working with them during the night hours; making an effort to improve the quality and that started making a difference. The medium quality Assam garden of Jardines at that time (Kopati) touched top price in the tea auction. He fondly remembers Sudha Deb, Paresh Nag, Gulu Bedi, as his tea gurus from whom he learnt a lot.

Work philosophy

Working in the gardens with the planters made him understand the kind of tough life led by the garden managers as the manufacturing season spread over eight to nine months. He says that he felt humbled by the cooperation of the staff who were working under those conditions and he owes it all to them. Man management - an unshakable conviction in human kindness without attacking anyone else's values is the mantra he believes in. Professionally, he took constructive action himself, before instructing others and he enjoyed this style of working. He believes that if one is in tune with one's own purpose, then nothing can come in between.

Tea besides hard work was also a rewarding experience. A regal lifestyle which Pushpa, his wife used to talk about, rather enviously. "My wife would often envy the tea memsa'abs for living a life of luxury. The multi-cuisine meals in the gardens filled us with awe."

When he retired from Jardines he was approached by Balmer Lawerie to join them. Here, he worked for five years followed by a short stint in Egypt and then, finally a joint venture between a company in Singapore and a food company in Australia. Subsequently, he spent a few years in advising smaller tea companies and focused on improving the quality of tea and blends.

Erstwhile Kolkata

Kolkata, according to the Vasvanis was a beautiful, well-managed city. One had to be formally dressed in jackets, more so as

the tea industry was dominated by the British. Victoria Memorial was a dream-like place; trams and hand rickshaws used to be main modes of transport. He, however, misses the metallic structures around the Victoria Memorial which were later removed for political reasons. Since the freedom agitation was on, there used to be lot of strikes, but the British were civil and respectful. And there was no discrimination of any kind.

Pushpa Vasvani

Meeting Mrs Vasvani was a pleasure as she light-heartedly glossed over anecdotes and some personal incidents from the past. She graduated from Pune. Her father, an engineer was settled in Sudan. She too aspired to be with her parents, tried and got a job in the ministry of education as a science teacher. She would earn eighty days' annual leave with air passage upto Delhi, which she enjoyed the most. She always loved to travel and one of her fondest memories has been a holiday to Europe with her sister in 1959. Gulab's uncle too worked as an engineer in the Government of Sudan and was on a UN assignment. The two families got very friendly. Together they exchanged notes on their respective families, their business concerns, children and, of course, eligible daughters and sons.

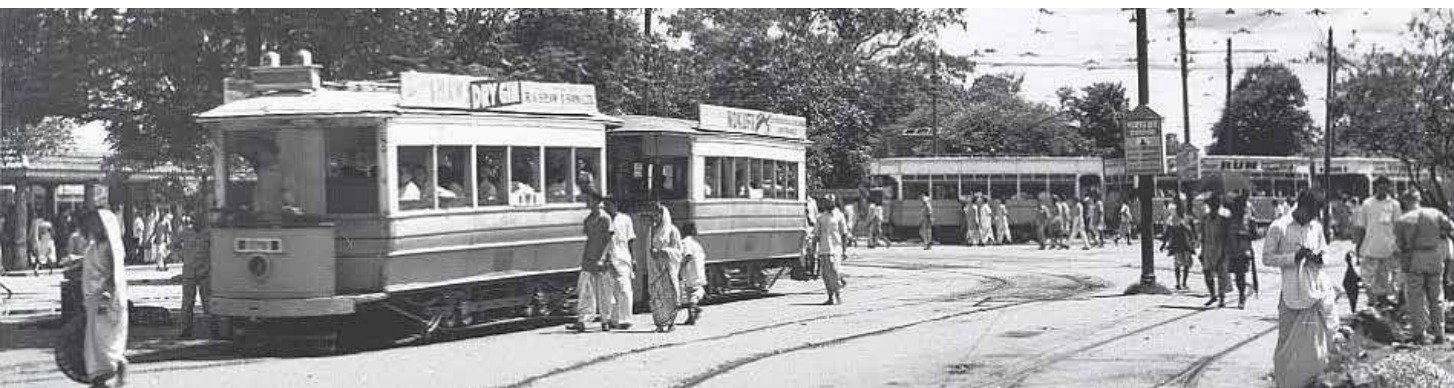
In 1961, when she came to India on leave, she met Gulab, as he was returning from London. Chemistries clicked. Seeing Gulab the first time, in her words, she was impressed. This was her Prince Charming who came riding in, perfect, suave, forthright and ambitious. But she had

one question to ask him and that was, if he could sustain her lifestyle and her standard of living, she chuckles naughtily. It would perhaps be even better, was his answer.

Pushpa's aunt Sarla, organized a small engagement ceremony, with just family members. Next morning congratulatory messages started pouring in. Taken unawares, Pushpa and Gulab started denying it, for it was a family secret. Some called to check if the news was authentic, some expressed dismay at the fact that she was so fair and he so dark, some felt hurt for not being told. Later, they got to know that it was aunt Sarla's idea to put this news in the papers to ensure solidarity in their relationship.

In 1961, when she came to India on leave, she met Gulab, as he was returning from London. Chemistries clicked.

Pushpa went back to Sudan, resolute in her decision; resigned from her job, came back and the marriage was solemnized in December 1961. They have been happy with one another and are enjoying 58 years of togetherness. As a handy matrimonial tip she says that good relationships need time and effort, decluttering and freedom. Relationships need to be kept fresh and





Life had a surreal quality to it, enabling us to manifest our fantasies into reality

not static with adequate communication, loads of trust and lots of time for one's own self too, me time as it is known popularly. She also remembers how way back in those days, she got rebuffed by one of her uncles when she congratulated him on having a lovely baby girl. He got angry and retorted how inappropriate it was to felicitate the birth of a baby girl. This affected Pushpa and she started praying fervently that she be blessed only with

daughters. She has three lovely daughters Sushma, Anjali and Usha.

Good old times

"Life had a surreal quality to it, enabling us to manifest our fantasies into reality. We had sprawling bungalows when we were both in Jardines and Balmer Lawrie. Here we stayed for ten long years. Jardine Henderson's bungalow housed the biggest bedroom I have ever slept in and I would wonder how on earth could we ever adjust in a small apartment ever again."

Everyday scene

"We go for a walk to the lakes at 9 am and Gulab does his stock market investments through a broker and evenings are happily spent, socializing with friends."

Pushpa loves cooking and would give cooking lessons to children when they stayed on Lee Road.

Seeing her art on the walls of her beautiful home on Mayfair Road, one can just admire her skills. She is a great painter who has reproduced old masterpieces and has been awarded for the same. She took art lessons from Bangalore.

She has been a regular volunteer for Mother Teresa and has also been at the helm of affairs of charitable organizations and international social welfare groups.

Walking out, one was touched with a strong feeling of history, a sense of plantation ethos and grandeur that over the years, merely changes hands – from one to the other. Otherwise nothing ever changes in the tea estates surely!



REMINISCENCES

When men with hairy chests and legs walked the ramp!

– **Krupa David**, member *The Planters Society of Eastern India*

It was customary for the Garden to which you were being transferred to send a transport for you and your 'jiti miti' (local lingo for baggage! Wife excluded!!). There were some Managers with a sadistic tendency who sent a truck and if you did not have your own car, you jolly well rode in the truck cab! Not that the Manager of Zurrantee was a sadist, but the Zurrantee Jeep was off the road

and it was just an hour's drive between Hope and Zurrantee. We were requested to avail ourselves of the services of the 'cab' of the truck sent for our baggage!

Pochy Chopra, the Zurrantee Manager, was known to me and was an old Nagpur lad (same as me) and my eldest sister's classmate! Therefore, I didn't mind the lorry ride. Jyoti, however, was not amused with the arrangements, having been jolted

about in the cab and partially intoxicated by the diesel fumes emanating from the engine, mixed with a heady odour from Ram, the driver's, armpits!

To cut a long story short, we arrived at Zurrantee on the 12th of April, 1972 just before lunch, and drove into the assistant's bungalow to be welcomed by Viru Narain, the Senior Assistant, with whom we were to share the bungalow till he moved off to



Kumargram. Zurrantee is in the Chulsa sub-district and is situated at the foothills of the Kalimpong range of hills. The Garden is pretty and the topography resembled the palm of your hand, the palm and fingers representing the tea area and the gaps between the fingers deep ravines (jhoras). In the old days, these were well-stocked with wild-life.

Our bungalow was situated on the edge of one such 'jhora' and between the factory and the Manager's bungalow, which was further up the hill. The road was deplorable: kutchra' (unmetalled), rutted and unmaintained! This was not due to negligence but due to a serious paucity of funds. Tea was going through a bad phase and Zurrantee was a loss-making estate on the sale list. The garden

was literally held together with a 'bit of glue and a shoe lace'!



The mention of the numerous 'jhoras' at Zurrantee and wild-life reminds me of Rod Brown. Rod was an assistant at Zurrantee in the mid-fifties. I met him a few years ago and arranged for him to visit the Doors on a trip down nostalgia lane! Rod had contacted Vimlesh Sharma, who was Goodricke's VP Operations when I was Managing Director and who had been – for a brief period – Rod's assistant in Aibheel. This story is remarkable!

In 2002, my younger daughter got married and as usual, relatives from both

sides converged at Calcutta. One of Jyoti's cousins, who is married to John Gillo from Gloucestershire in England, also happened to join us, and I had accommodated John and Amara at our Judges' Court guest house. Now, we have a house magazine called "Caddy" and all our guest houses are provided with copies.

With the wedding over and before their departure, John asked me for a copy of the "Tea Caddy" which I gave him. Now, John was the Manager of a bank in Gloucester. One day, a client came to see him who, while waiting for John, happened to see this magazine lying on his table and - out of curiosity - leafed through it. Lo and behold, he saw a photograph in it which he recognized. Very excited, he asked John where he had got this magazine from and the whole story came out! "Well!" exclaimed the client, "I am also an ex-Goodricke man!"

This client was none other than Rod Brown who had recognized Vimlesh's photograph in the Goodricke 'Caddy'! One thing led to another and sometime later, Rod Brown visited us and the Estates where he had worked! One of the stories which Rod told us was about the day he joined Tea and arrived at Zurrantee, early on a Sunday morning. Bill Milne was the Manager, and when Rod landed up at the factory he was directed to make his way to the Burra Bungalow where he would meet the Manager.

It so happened that Bill had been on a 'shikar' in the wee hours of Sunday, and when Rod drove into the Bungalow he



was confronted with a pair of dead Tigers, laid out on the verandah! He was shocked and nearly bolted back to Scotland! It transpired that Zurrantee in those days had had numerous tigers in its thickly forested jhoras. Now, of course, you would be lucky to spot a squirrel! Such was tea in the years gone by! I saw only the tail end of those good days, but the memories will remain with me right till the time I myself enter 'those Happy Hunting Grounds' for the last time!

There is another story about Bill Milne which I would like to share! Zurrantee, like most gardens in those days, had a 'Munshi' (the all-in-one contractor!) who supplied everything from getting labour for the garden from Ranchi and Chota Nagpur to the Sunday Bazar for the "Burra Memsahib" and to looking after the "biological needs" of certain bachelor assistants! Over time, he became a powerful and a rich man.

Unknown to Bill, Bhola the Munshi decided to buy the Superintendent's 'Stude'! Now, Mr Tockker was a formidable superintendent, who ran his bunch of gardens with an iron hand and even Bill, the great shikari, was in awe of him! It was customary that when you saw the "Soop's" car on the road you pulled to the side and allowed him to pass! Many Managers, if they could have stood up in the car, would have done so and also saluted!

One day, returning from the club, Bill saw the Supt's car in his rear-view mirror and quickly pulled to the side. The car passed him and slowed down. From the rear-seat window, a head popped out and with a cheery wave exclaimed: "Salam Sahib!!" – It was our very own Bhola! To cut a long story short, within a week, the next owner of the Stude was a Marwari from Siliguri!!

Getting back to our first day at Zurrantee! Viru gave us a lovely lunch and after lunch, I was required to pay my respects to the Manager at his Bungalow. Viru had a car and drove me up. Pochy was a tall, handsome six-footer and an extremely pleasant man. Asha, his wife, was a charming, attractive lady and they made a lovely couple!

Pochy welcomed me and explained the set-up of the garden over a cup of tea. Viru was to move out and I was to take over his division. The other Senior Assistant, who ran the factory, was Chander Kapoor, an engineer. We were soon to be joined by Nand Gopal (NG) Gupta, another engineer assistant junior to me. Pochy explained that no money was being put into the garden and matters were heading towards a confrontation with the Management at head office. In fact, Pochy was leaving for Calcutta the next day for a meeting with the Directors. He was a tough Manager, and I am sure he gave them a piece of his mind.

The sad outcome of this was that Pochy apparently was so fed up with their attitude that he put in his 'chit' (resignation). Therefore, I really did not have much of a chance to work with him. This left a bitter taste all around, as later we came to know the reason: the grounds were being prepared to sell off the property!

The 'Chulsa Club' was the district club and not far from the garden, but because of the bad road, it took us about 45 minutes to reach. A lot of activity was going on as the club was rehearsing for a 'Fashion Show' with a difference - the models walking the ramp were to be all males dressed up in the most revealing ladies' dresses allowed by the 'Dooars Censor Board'!! We soon got caught up in this and I was given the task of handling the curtains! The show was a grand event, with planters from all over the Dooars attending the show and the dinner and dance afterwards.



I can still picture the hairy chests and legs showing below the mini-skirts! One of the assistants who was an extremely fair guy - slim and 'sweet'-looking - shaved himself completely all over!! I wouldn't have been surprised if he had made many a heart flutter (men's!). This took me back to the night before I boarded the Jamair flight to the Dooars, when I went to 'Princes' at the Grand Hotel in Calcutta to view the strip show and was shattered when the beautiful girl turned out to be a boy!! The only sad news which marred that evening was the arrival of Pochy with the news that he had 'packed' in his job.

“Oh! shit!” he said, “she must have fallen off!”

We had a great football team! They were called the "Chulsa Roughs" - more kicking of the shins than the ball! I played full-back with Leo D'Souza. Leo was a wonderful guy, much senior and great fun! He had a fund of jokes and stories. John Mackenzie, my Manager, was a football freak and loved playing. We had a formidable team: Bawa Kuldip Singh, Vijay Singh Mann, Derrick West, Viroo Narain, Bob Bhagat and Derrick Bobb are the names I can remember. Derrick West was an Anglo-Indian from Lucknow who spoke fluent "Lucknowi" Hindi - much better than any of us! His wife Lorraine was a lovely girl with a lisp!

One day, we had invited Derrick and Loraine for dinner (he was on Indong, a garden about three kilometers away). Derrick said that he would have to come on his motorbike as his car was off the road. I told him that if it rained I would drop him back and have his bike sent by lorry the next day. Promptly, at about eight in the evening, I heard his motorbike drive into our bungalow. Jyoti and I came out and saw that he was alone. We asked him where Lorraine was. "Lorraine?" he said, "she's with me!" Turning around, he saw that his pillion was empty!! "Oh! shit!" he said, "she must have fallen off!" Apparently, he had hit a bump near Matelli

and Lorraine was thrown off! We got into my car and drove towards Matelli. We found Lorraine standing on the side of the road in a rage! Poor Derrick never heard the end of it! It was all taken in good spirit and we had a great evening! Another guy on the football team had an unnerving experience - Vijay Singh Mann, who was an assistant on Indong and notorious in more ways than one!

Vijay was driving back from Jalpaiguri one night and on the old Jaldacca forest road, he met a lone elephant standing plumb in the center of the road. Vijay honked his horn, but the Tusker could not care less! The elephant steadily advanced towards the car and when he was just ten feet away, Vijay got out of the car and ran! Seeing a culvert on the road he got inside the five-foot diameter RCC pipe. The elephant followed him and tried to get at him from the open end. Vijay kept moving from one end of the pipe to the other, trying to avoid the trunk! He told me that it was the first time that he "rubbed" noses with an elephant! Knowing Vijay's fondness for the opposite sex I told him it must certainly have been a "she" elephant! Leo D'Souza, another team member, told us this story. When he was in Baradighi Tea Garden, he found that whenever he and Jenny were out on a club evening (which meant from around 7pm to well past midnight!) he would find - on his return - that the level in his whiskey bottle was a bit lower. One evening, he drove off to the club as usual but decided to come back after an hour, on the quiet, and see what was happening in his absence. He drove back, parked his car some distance from the gate and walked stealthily towards the bungalow. Nearing the bungalow he was surprised to hear music! He approached the verandah and peeped into the drawing room and saw a sight which was, if anything, hilarious!

Leo saw his head Bearer dressed up in his

own dinner jacket and the Ayah dressed in one of Jenny's dresses, holding each other and dancing with the gramophone on! The "Jaroo Wallah" (sweeper) was standing nearby, wearing the Bearer's white jacket, with a tray full of drinks and some small eats! Leo strode into the room, bellowing like an enraged bull! The servants ran helter-skelter! When he finally caught the bearer by the scruff of his neck and sought an explanation he was told that "we wanted to also experience the fun just like the Sahibs do!" Anyway, that was the end of that domestic episode!

Such was life in those days! Living in Zurrantee was tough. The factory was in shambles and how the 'kal sahib' (engineer assistant) and the mechanic kept it going was a miracle! We had DC current in the bungalows and it promptly went off at 10 pm as the engine could not take the load! Water supply was from a hydram which pumped up water from the 'jhora'. The ram was an ingenious contraption which ran in perpetual motion, powered by the gravitational force of the water itself! Summer months were a problem when the water flow decreased, and water had to be supplemented by a tanker brought up from the factory.

Life at Zurrantee carried on and we all slogged away.

My time with my new bride was cut short when, on the 24th of April, we received a telegram that her mother had passed away on the 23rd. The next day, I put her on the Jamair flight to Calcutta and from there her cousin put her on a train to Nagpur. I was a forced bachelor for three months till she returned. In the meantime, as I was due for a car loan from the Company, I bought myself a second-hand Ambassador. I did not

like the colour of the car and thought Jyoti may like a nice 'daffodil' yellow! So I got the local garage to paint it, having shown them photographs of Daffodils in a field!

Alas, what came out was anything but a resemblance to a Daffodil! I will not describe the colour but will tell you what Jyoti had to say on her return! In the meantime, we were told that a new Manager was being posted and that he was John Mackenzie from Assam. John was a young acting Manager with a reputation for hard work, honesty and, to boot, was a great sportsman. He played a great game of football. Monika, his wife, was a German with a no-nonsense attitude, but with a heart of gold!

Three months passed off quickly; Jyoti arrived by the same Jamair flight and I went to receive her in my new car! All our cars were parked on the airfield and I had told her that I had painted the car a 'daffodil' yellow for her! Her first words on alighting from the aircraft and spotting the car went something like this: "Krupsee, I hope that 'sh...t'-coloured car is not ours?" Well, she said it, not!! Come to think of it, there definitely was a close resemblance! Suffice it to say that a promise was made to have the colour changed!

Life at Zurrantee carried on and we all slogged away. John was a great leader and eventually, the four of us became good friends. Christopher, their first baby, and Shalini, our first baby, were born in Zurrantee - Christopher in March 1973 and Shalini in April 1973! As I write this episode (April 2011), John was with us last week and has just gone back to the UK! We have kept up our friendship these past 40 years. John was the last expat Manager to retire from Goodricke's in 1979. He went back to studies and has just retired as an Associate Professor at Napier University in Scotland having done his MBA and CFA! Who says that planters are dumb?!

To be continued...



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What's up



Dancing keeps us happy



Pageant of colours



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Annual General Meeting in pictures

14 September 2018



AGM in progress



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A moment of silence for the departed



Thunderous applause



Rapt audience



The smiles that steer the ship



Happy hours in progress



Happy hours in progress



Victor enthraling his audience as usual



Golf gossip



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The winsome committee



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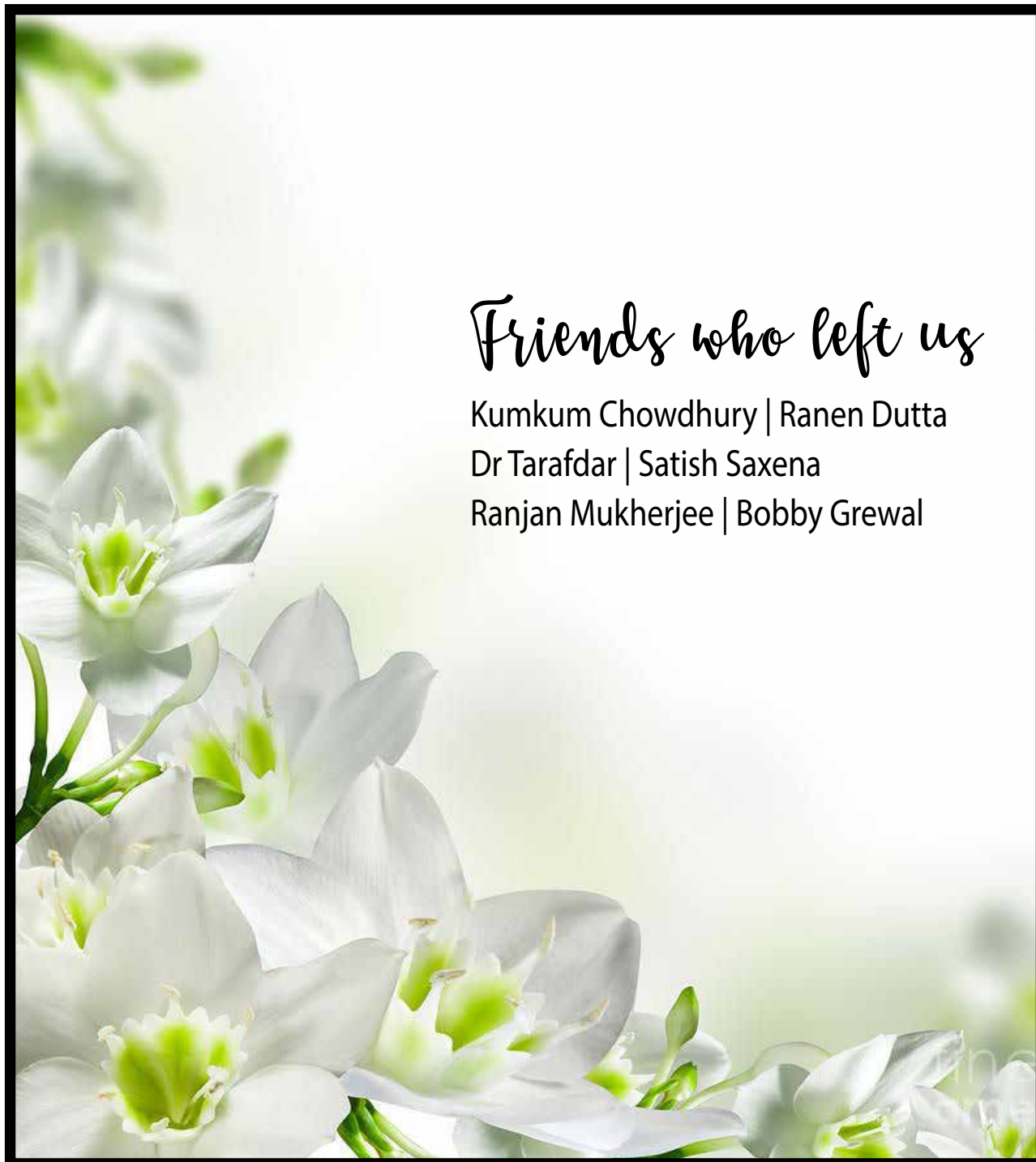
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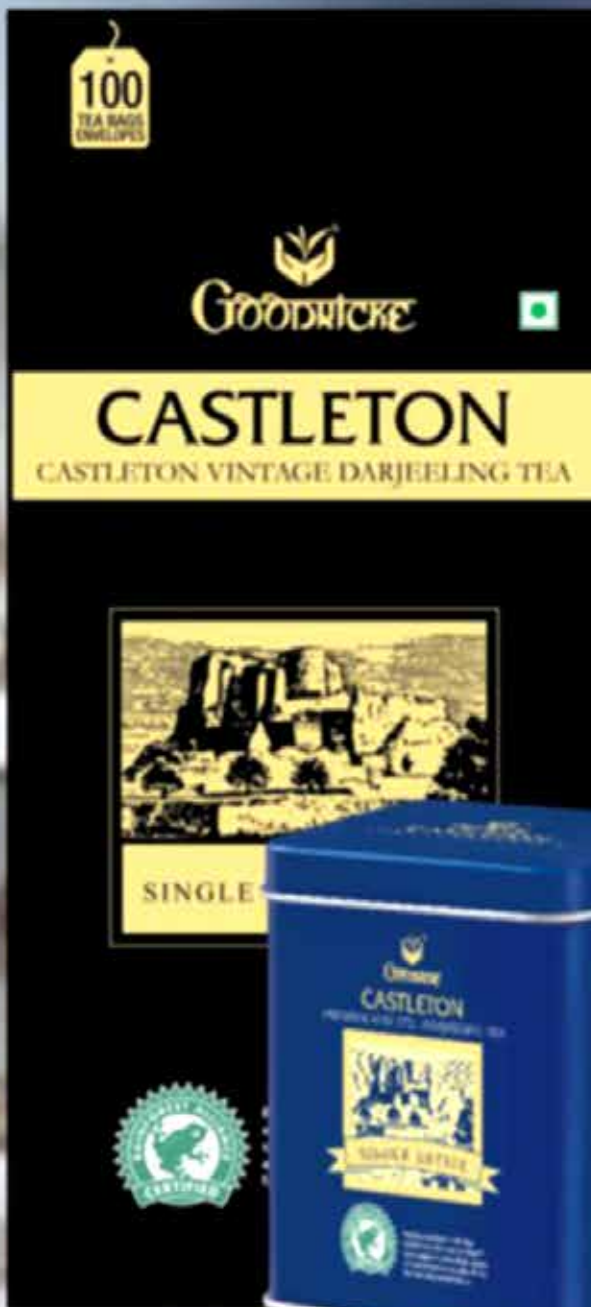
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