



Tea Trails

THE PLANTERS SOCIETY OF EASTERN INDIA

President's Message

I have pleasure in presenting the fourth edition of Tea Trails. Undoubtedly it has been delayed. Please accept my apologies.

Kudos to the editorial committee comprising of Ms. Anju Munshi, Ms. Brenda Dennis and Mr. Kaustuv Bhadra for producing a bigger and better edition with more photographs.

In this Issue we are focusing on the the Rains Get-Together held in July 2016 at the Masonic Lodge and the last Annual General Meeting held at Tollygunge Club on 23rd September 2016. Both the events were very well attended and enjoyed by those present.

The highlight of the AGM was the introduction of the proposal to launch a welfare fund to assist our members with a medical assistance scheme. We have received some generous contributions but I look forward to greater support from our members towards building this fund. Unless we pool our resources, however small and help others, we cannot expect to receive help. Please do give generously; all donations will be gratefully acknowledged.

In this edition our editor has interviewed a very senior member-Mr S.R.(Ranjan) Mukherjee. All of us know that Ranjan da has been the bedrock of the Planters Society for so many years. However there are many interesting personal anecdotes which Ranjan da has shared and would be of interest to all.

We held our annual picnic at Joy land Resort on 12th Feb 2017, courtesy the venue provided by Luxmi Tea Co. The picnic was a grand success and enjoyed by all those who participated.

The committee has been working for some time on releasing a new updated GUNTI Book. This has proved to be a herculean task but I assure you that we will soon bring to you this members' Directory which should prove very useful.

Lastly I need your help and suggestions to expand our member base. Please reach out to those who are not yet members.

With best wishes,

Warm personal regards,

Deepak Atal



Meet your members **S.R. MUKHERJEE**



Subodh Ranjan Mukherjee

Talking to Mr SR Mukherjees [Ranjan] was like walking through pages of history . Tea tales as narrated by Mr. Mukherjee are steeped in a glorious past and they ring a bell of colonial ethos, bordering on the magic of fairy tales. His narrative depicts the lifestyle of plantations in yester years. Years may have gone by but the spirit still continues, says he .A cup of tea served in a true English style with paper thin and well starched napkins set the tone for a conversation, unraveling a lesser known facet of this wonder man.

He fought for India at the age of 13, has been a freedom fighter ,interacted with political leaders like Purna Das, Hemanta Basu, Jatin Bhattacharya and Ramesh Chandra Dutta to name a few .He spent one year in Faridpur jail with such illustrious legends. He refused a tamrapatra and freedom fighters' pension allowance, for he thought patriotism could not be quantified. He left a lucrative job ,an opulent lifestyle of London to come back to his family after four years ,joined plantations in 1956 as an engineerworked hard and made a mark for himself in the industry !

It has been a long journey for him, a journey of self discovery, adventure and hard work.

Some excerpts from the conversation.

How do you remember your early days?

Freedom for my country was prime in my mind and I joined the students' movement for Quit India resolution at the age of thirteen . I was taken into custody along with the luminaries of freedom movement . It was quite an education and honour to spend moments with legends like Hemanta Basu and Ramesh Chandra Dutta to name a few . Soon after that I finished my matriculation. My zeal for independence continued but owing to family pressure, which was very common those days , I decided to move on . So from Faridpur, [now in Bangladesh], I came to Kolkata. I got into Andrew Yule Port Engg where I was trained for marine engineering . After completing my apprenticeship in Yule I went to Hastings Marine office, but they said that they preferred diesel engine experience .

Mr. William Robb, a Scotsman who was working in port Engineering dept of Andrew Yule and Mr. T.C. Longfield, Managing Director of the company helped me in getting into Diesel engineering training in Manchester. I was packed off to distant shores. I stayed there for three years and was later called for an interview to Liverpool for the merchant navy. I was terribly sea sick so declined the offer.

By this time I had the yearnings to go back home for I wanted to be with the family.



How did you get into Tea?

I was called by Kilburn for an interview with Duncan McNeill, London .They were looking for someone for their Kolkata office. It was an opportunity and I didn't miss it. I applied and luckily got selected and was trained with Crossly Engines in Manchester. Those days all tea gardens were run by Crossly Engines.

As I was getting ready for my new role,.Suez canal trouble extended my London stay by another six months and upon returning to India Kilburn sent me to Tejpur, to one of the Gleadens gardens called Sona Jhuli Tea estate. I made sure to spend two weeks with my family in Kolkata before stepping into the lush tea estates. A new life awaited me. All I knew about the tea gardens was that they were infested with leeches and snakes. How wrong was I.

Your first impressions of the tea gardens?

Mr. Cormack was the manager of the property. My first night in the tea estates was quite scary for while we were having tea one chowkidar came and announced that a tiger had killed a cow just outside the bungalow. Later I realised that my bedroom was just behind that spot and what separated me was a mere jaali window. That night was a horror night and I could not sleep. Gradually I got used to these interesting anecdotes that happened every now and then.

Mr. Cormack took me under his wings and introduced me to the Thakurbari club. It was a tennis Saturday and I met quite a number of members and young assistants from nearby gardens. Some of them are still my very good friends and we cherish a strong bonding- Mr Kumar Sardana and Mr Amrit Sethi, to name a few.

I loved the club weekends and the good life it bought along with, fell in love with the velvety tea estates, its challenges and promises, understood the workings and the dynamics of the estates. It was a people oriented job. Strong camaraderie, understanding and an openness, were the rules to live by. It was also a remote area so happiness was an important quotient and one had to make the best of what was available. I decided to stay on. This was my calling. Subsequently was sent to the South bank-Jorhat and very soon I was touring all over, to help the gardens with engine problems. It was great and I didn't mind the same as I was single.

Marriage?

Got married in 1961 to a beautiful lady called Maitreyee [Jolly] Mukherjee and it was time to settle down. I was looking for accommodation close by which would facilitate my moving around to the neighbouring gardens. Mr. Douglas Prrie, manager Diplu tea estate helped me in finding one in jorhat . The Chinese aggression took place in 1962 and a lot of European tea planters had left or were leaving. The Chinese advanced swiftly towards Arunachal Pradesh and were getting closer to Tejpur. My jeep had gone for repairs . I felt helpless for by that time I had a young son. I was standing by the main road, trying to find out a way, when Mr. Bill Macch, manager Methony tea estate, saw me and stopped. I asked him if he could drop me at Lattakujan tea estate where my friend stayed. He immediately offered to pick up my son and my wife and together we left. The same evening we heard Pt. Nehru addressing the nation , particularly the people of Assam, asking them to be brave and patient .Owing to some diplomatic measures that followed the situation did not get worse, truce followed; things came back to normalcy.

Interesting anecdotes if any?

I was in Noharan tea garden and was a bachelor. Mr. Mitchell, manager Sikoni , a Williamson Magor garden invited me over for a Christmas celebration. I crossed over in a ferry as we didn't have bridges those days and was collected in a garden jeep. We had a great time together.

Coming back the ferry got stuck in a sand bank, got held up had to turn back . The oil India people had a helicopter service and Gordon Simpson who was the estate manager of one of the gardens close by, knew the oil community. Since I had cultivated friendship with him, I requested him to bail me out of that situation. He had me dropped in a helicopter, which could not land; hence had to come down with the help of a ladder and from there on boarded a lorry to reach my garden.

When I was in Rangagora garden in Jorhat, Assam was under curfew due to some riots. I got the information that a garden called Salona [post office salanah] had an engine breakdown. I had to go there ,but did not know how to, for the place was under curfew. It was a risky proposition but duty was calling me. So in the early hours, I sneaked out of my house but sadly enough was caught by my friend Mr. Shankar Chakravarty, SP, Dibrugarh and later principal, Police training college. He saw me and was rather angry to see me taking a chance in curfew hours. I explained how manufacturing process would be stalled because of the breakdown and how urgent it was for me to go and reach there on time. He empathized and arranged a vehicle with a police escort. So strong was our sense of duty those days!

I Also recall a very interesting change that took place in my tenure. Kilburn company was a sister concern of McLean Berry which later on became a division of Mclean Berry and that's when I joined. Kilburn lost the agency of Crossley Premier Engines to Belliss and Morcom, which had an office in Kolkata. I was the only Indian who was asked to stay back in Crossley Engineering company and all others joined Belliss and Morcom. McNeill Berry transferred me to the tea department to look after the factories. You can call it strokes of luck/destiny or being at the right place at the right time or mere coincidence but opportunities are spread at every corner, one just has to be perceptive and be aware of the same. Many years later McNeil Berry and Williamson Magor amalgamated and the new company was called McNeil Magors.



Any changes in tea?

I retired in 87, don't see many changes, though technological advancements have to be acknowledged. My time tea leaves were naturally withered but now there is a withering trough and engine breakdowns are also managed well.

Today I think labour is aware of the hazards of drinking and chewing tobacco and have started saving money. Those days it was too much drinking and no saving habits.

Did you find a discriminatory attitude on the part of the Europeans?

No not all. They were very respectful and duty bound. They accepted Indians with an open heart. I guess how people treat you depends a lot on your own selves. The European ladies used to keep themselves busy in giving and attending parties, they played card games like Bridge and Mahjong. They also enjoyed gardening activities like flower shows, flower arrangements etc. I was in London and on one occasion some children upon seeing me just ran away. I narrated this incident to my house lady, she laughed it off and said that mothers in order to control their children would concoct tales about the Indians and say do it or else an Indian will come and catch you. Some kids also wanted to know that if I was an Indian, then why would I not wear feathers and colourful hair bands!

You have been the pioneer of the Planter Society of Eastern India. How did this idea occur to you?

After my retirement I missed the life in the gardens as the city people were different. Tea planters have a different profile, a different identity. I used to meet retired couples from the gardens and we used to catch up in different clubs of Calcutta. There was a strong and an unmistakable bonding and compatibility factor. In 1997 all retired planters had a party in CCFC and when this idea to form a society was floated, all responded positively and this is how the Planters Society of Eastern India was born. Major S.N. Banerjea, popularly known as Bruno became the first president of PSEI and Ashish [Bablu] Chowdhury was the first Vice president.

Footnote:

The interview finished, but the thoughts lingered on. What a lifestyle that packed adventure with a professional zeal! laughter with anxiety, work with pleasure! A perfect balance to live a life of ones choice.

So many years will go down, the sun will rise and set in the tea estates, but the spirit will always prevail, making all our todays into tomorrow's yesterday!



**Monsoon
Ball
July - 2016**



Laughter is the best medicine -
The charming PSEI gang enjoys the happy hours



The members enjoying the delectable array of dishes



The dance competition in full swing



Awesome, winsome Atals matching their steps in complete harmony



The most loved Usha Uthup entertaining the members in her mellifluous voice along with Daniel Ghaznavi



One of the winners of the dance contest, walk away with the hamper



Launching of 'Tea Trails' receives a hearty applause at the monsoon ball



Savouring the meal in comfort and in PSEI ambience



Celebrating the birth of 'Tea Trails'



Elegant ladies listening to the president's address



Eminent members of PSEI

Discovery of tea (Assam) The Singphos

Ali Zaman

The descendents of Bom Bessa Gaum, Chief of the Singpho clan, who showed native tea to Charles Alexander Bruce resides in Bessa Gaon, in Ledo Assam. The writer recently met the present chief, Rajkumar Bisa Nong Singpho, the great grand son of Bom Bessa Gaum.



This is a recent photograph of Rajkumar Bisa Nong Singpho, the great grand son of Bom Bessa Gaum.



Ali with his lovely wife Shireen

The Singphos were a major tribe of Upper Burma and their territory once extended from Arunachal (NEFA) into Assam, beyond Jorhat, and covered large tracts in northern Burma. When the East India Company, by the treaty of Yandabo, 1826, annexed Upper Burma to Assam, the Company made a similar treaty with the tribal chiefs of the different clans, at Sadiya. The territorial expansion was made primarily for propagation of tea. The Singpho's knew the art of tea making and the first European to study their method was William Griffith FLS Esq. The Singpho method of preparing tea - only young tea leaves were used which were semi roasted in a large iron vessel - the leaf was stirred and rolled in the hands during roasting. When duly roasted they were exposed to the sun for three days, some to the dew and alternately to the sun. It was finally packed in bamboo chungas into which it was tightly rammed. The tea as found by Griffith was called 'Ban Fhullup' or jungle tea, as recorded in the Private Journals of William Griffith, who was on an Assam Deputation for examination of the plant. Griffith also noticed that tea leaves were eaten as a vegetable food prepared in mustard oil and garlic. A similar salad recipe in Burma, called 'Letpet', promised martial bliss. Here the leaves were boiled for several months for fermentation. The resuscitated leaves were chopped and mixed with oil, garlic, fried shrimps, fruits and dried coconut and served to newly wed. When tea cultivation started on Singpho land the East India Company paid a land rent to the Chief. Irritated over a delay in receiving payment Bessa Gaum hacked off some newly planted tea, little realising that his destructive act actually helped the industry. The cut plants resurrected and put on vigorous growth, this initiated pruning. To this day the estate where Bessa Gaum cut the plants bears the nomenclature 'Bessakopie' (hacked by Bessa). The man who introduced Charles Alexander Bruce to Bessa Gaum was Maniram Dutta Borbhandar Barua, the first native tea planter of India.

The pioneer accused of plotting against the British, in the uprisings of 1857, was tried and sentenced to death by hanging, carried out in Jorhat jail on 26th February 1858. Maniram's execution caused great resentment in Assam, and sympathisers, which included Bessa Gaum, were taken to task. Bessa Gaum, who was on a Company pension of Rs 50/- per men sum, was arrested when a Col. Write was killed on Singpho land. The tribal chief, kept in Jorhat jail was sentenced to life imprisonment and transported to the Andaman, where the unsung hero of tea, died a prisoner of the Cellular Jail. NB: During WW II when the American Forces, under the Command of General 'Vinegar Joe Stilwell, operated from Ledo the Singphos rendered valuable support service. In appreciation for the help received the US Government settled members of the community in California, where they still exist.

April 1, 2008

Ali Zaman has very kindly supplied a correction to his story shown below on this page saying At long last Ram Kumar Mahanta's photograph as a Kings Commissioned Officer with 18th Royal Garwhal Rifles. There is a slight change in the story I gave. Mahanta cycled to Rangoon, sent his report and went on to USA visiting China, Japan, Phillipnes and Hawaii. When WWII broke out he was in London and immediately applied for war service. He was appointed as an instructor in first aid in the London A.R.P. organisation before sailing for India



A Happy group ready for the cruise

left to Right: Walza Mathew - Goodricke, Mamen (Mat) Mathew -
 "Dipali Saha - Williamson Magor (McLeod Russel), (lady in front) Dilip Saha - Williamson Magor
 (McLeod Russel), Ali Zaman - Williamson Magor, Enu Bhattacharya - Gillanders & Assam Frontier
 Chatterjee (Chat) - Williamson Magor (Assam Co), Shukla Sen - Tata Tea (James Finlay)
 Subir Ray - Williamson Magor (Assam Co), Rebony Ray - Williamson Magor (Assam Co)
 Nazma Chatterjee - Williamson Magor (Assam Co)

AGM

Sept. 23RD - 2016



What's up?



Going back in time-
Recreating the magic



Cheers and applause!



AGM in progress



The atal Atals



A rapt audience at the AGM

PICNIC

Feb. 12TH - 2017



What's the plan with the red bucket?



Anything urgent?



Joy March



Putting the hair down and lifting the spirits



Capturing the good times



Reminiscing the good old days at Duncans



The revelers flock together at the PSEI picnic

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