



Tea Trails

THE PLANTERS SOCIETY OF EASTERN INDIA

President's Message

It gives me great pleasure to roll out the bulletin for the Planters Society of Eastern India. The last issue was produced in 2013. Whilst congratulating the editorial team led by Ms Anju Munshi for an excellent compilation I would urge the team to bring to us another two issues during the Year 2016/17. The large majority of our members hardly meet and are spread all over the North East. It is therefore critically important to launch a vehicle to communicate the activities of the Society to keep everyone abreast with developments. We will expand the scope of the bulletin as we progress but primarily I see it as an e-bulletin which will be environment friendly and cost effective. Please do update us with your e-mail addresses. Those members who are not using electronic mail will be put on a separate mailing list and will be sent a hard copy.

In this issue our editor has interviewed a very senior colleague, Mr Saroj Mehera. I am sure reading Mr Mehera's views will bring nostalgic memories to most of us. We have also provided a glimpse of the very successful and enjoyable picnic held on 7th Feb 2016. The next do is planned for Sunday 17th July at the Northampton Hall, 19 Park Street. Please do block the date in your diary. I look forward to your participation in this fun evening. Details will be circulated later.

The accounts for year ending March 2016 are under finalization and we propose to convene the AGM of our Society in September 2016. Details will be communicated separately. And some good news! In response to the efforts of my team we have enrolled 30 new members since the last AGM. I warmly welcome the new members and trust they will enjoy the fellowship with members of their fraternity.

So until then, happy bonding. Keep healthy and stay fit.

Warm personal regards,

Deepak Atal





INTERVIEW

MEET YOUR MEMBERS

Mr. Saroj Mehera

He served as Managing Director / President of Tata Finlays / Tata Tea Limited, retiring in 1985 ; was the Chairman, Indian Tea Association from 1982-83, Chairman, Tea Research Association between 1972 and 73, followed by President of Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry from 1979 -80.

He was the Honorary Counsel of Finland in Kolkata, decorated as knight 1st class of the White Rose of Finland and Honorary Counsel of Norway in Kolkata, decorated as knight 1st class of the Royal Norwegian order of merit ...

Breathless !

But it doesn't end here. He has been Captain Royal Calcutta Golf Club in the early eighties, and President Indian Golf Union. His interests span from golf to swimming, cryptic cross words to reading.

Meet our senior member **Mr. Saroj Mehera**. On a hot sultry afternoon it was my pleasure and privilege to meet Mr Mehera for a candid talk on his illustrious journey as a tea planter with his recollections and fond memories, especially about tea life as it was lived yesterday .

What made you join the plantations?

After graduating with a BSc Hons. degree in Chemistry from St Xavier's College, I was at a total loss as to what I should do next. My parents had died a year before and there really was no one to guide me. While I was on a holiday in Darjeeling I met K.I.M. Fegan Manager of Dooteriah tea estate who suggested I approach his employers, James Finlay and Company, a Glasgow based company with branches in India. This I did and soon met with success in a covenanted appointment as assistant at Powai in Upper Assam in February 1949.

Tell us about your early days at the garden as a fresher from Kolkata?

My first manager was Graham Thomson, a Scotsman from Edinburgh, a married man, aged 53, who had served in the Royal Flying Corps (the RAF's predecessor) in World War I, earning a DFC , proudly displayed in a case in his bungalow drawing-room. There were two other assistants, both World War II veterans aged 30 and 29 respectively. The older one was an Irishman from Ulster, "Paddy" McLoughlin, who had been a rear-gunner in the RAF, the younger a Scot from Glasgow, with an engineering background, Jack Buchanan, who had served in Burma in the ranks of the British army. His broad Glasgow accent totally foxed me initially and his wife, Laura, also Glaswegian, but less broad, would translate for me!

I had a "chang" bungalow to myself and having brought an old family servant with me, I settled down fairly easily. The bathroom in the bungalow had a washbasin and flush toilet but no shower or proper bathtub; in lieu, Thomson had installed, for my use, a huge wooden coffin-like contraption into which hot water, boiled and ferried in from

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the outside kitchen, was filled by a minion called a "paniwalla". I could have a long soak in it but occasionally had to remove wooden splinters from my bottom!

Kamjhari was done on a bicycle .

What was the sporting scene like?

It was very active. My sporting activities at the club consisted of swimming, at which I was rather good and squash at which I wasn't. Annual "Meets" of various clubs in Upper Assam were great occasions for sporting and social activities.

On the garden, I would play soccer and hockey with the staff and workers. Among the latter, the Oraons and Mundas played hockey in the best traditions of their fellow tribal, Jaipal Singh, who had represented India in the Olympics and later became an M.P. I was able to put together an eleven which challenged the superiority of a similarly constituted team from Pengaree

T.E. in the Doom Dooma area. Both our teams also played regularly in Digboi and Dibrugarh against various non-tea local sides. We had meets which were a feature of tea garden life during my time. Each club would organise an annual "Meet" which featured sports like tennis and golf and activities like eating and drinking! Members were expected to provide the victuals at their club's meet. Women played tennis in Digboi and Mariani clubs .Jorhat Race Week was an annual feature of the Jorhat Gymkhana Club. Horse races were organised in addition to other competitions.

How and why did you move to Kolkata?

I had served in Powai from 1949 to end 52 and Kakajan thereafter till July 55. Till Digboi it was fine but once I was transferred to Kakajan I was getting depressed and fed up with plantation life style. When I went on six months' overseas leave which was

one's entitlement in those days I went to James Finlay office in Glasgow during one of my leave periods. They heard me and were sympathetic and I shortly moved to Kolkata. Here I was introduced to Minnie [Savita] who has been my wife for nearly 56 years now.

When you look back how does it feel to have accomplished so much?

It feels great. Tea has been a rewarding career from tea planting, tasting, trading and general management, I have done it all.

I became the head of Finlay's Calcutta branch in 1972 and in 1976/77 piloted conversion of the company's Indian operations into Tata -Finlay limited where I was named Managing Director and in 1979 the President. In 1983 the company became Tata Tea Limited and I remained President until my retirement in 1985. My cup was full.



Powai bungalow 1949

What are the things that you look back, laugh and muse at?

I discovered that among my duties as the Kamjari Sahib was to act both as a sort of marriage registrar and a divorce court for the worker! Alliances and splits were faithfully recorded in a register, along with details of dowry as well as alimony. To this day I have no idea of the legality of these proceedings but they seemed to have had the sanction of custom and usage.

Do you feel nostalgic about the good old days?

Although during the course of my working life I had been to Assam several times, a spirit of nostalgia got hold of me recently at the age of 84 when I yearned to visit the two estates I had served on-Powai and Kakajan. Mr. Saeed Kidwai former colleague arranged a seven day itinerary for me which proved intensely heartwarming. I received not only a royal reception but also individual gifts for my wife and myself.

Did you see any noteworthy changes?

I was delighted to see the estates in immaculate condition including the tea I had planted in the 1950s.

I noticed that the main roads in Assam have greatly improved.

Dibrugarh airport [Mohan Bari] is a far cry

from the shack of the 1950's and Guwahati airport is impressive.

Alas! Tinsukhia is still a shanty town!

Today we talk of climate changes, earthquakes and floods, did you witness any of these natural disasters during your time?

The great earthquake of 15 August 1950 was something I will never forget. I was reading a book in bed when at about 8-30 p.m, garden time, there was an enormous jolt and, realising it was an earthquake, I jumped out of bed and just got to the door. My "chang" bungalow, because of its construction on iron stilts to withstand earthquakes by swaying with the ground movement, was shaking alarmingly and I was physically unable to move. I hung on to the door for dear life, totally petrified, expecting the roof to come down on my head and the floor to give way below me. Neither happened but the aftershocks continued throughout the night for several days afterwards.

The earthquake had caused enormous landslides in the mountainous regions of what is now Arunachal Pradesh, including one at a gorge in the North Lakhimpur area through which the river Subansiri flowed. I stood near the river bank and watched huge chunks of land disappearing into the raging river before my eyes.

Professionally what are the changes that you see today?

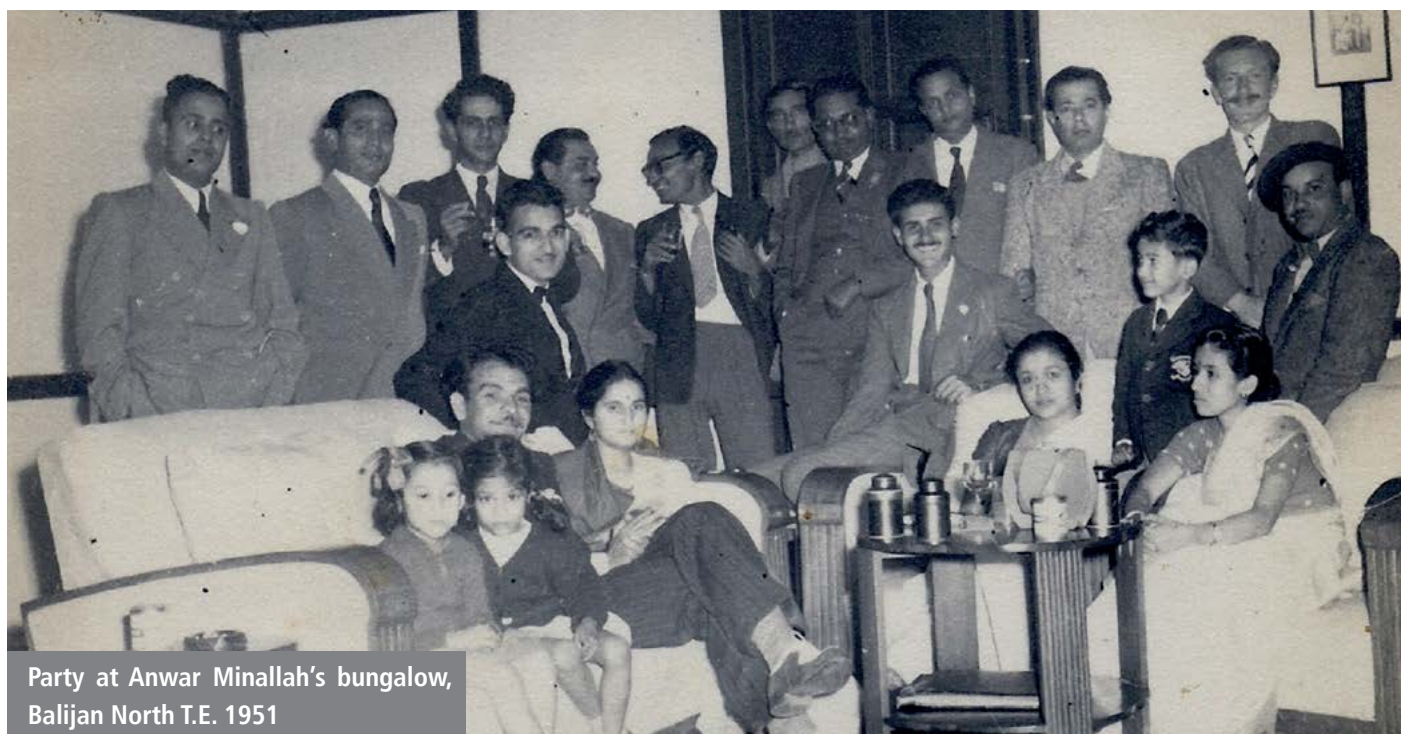
Tea hasn't changed at all, it is just the same except that the younger worker today doesn't want to stay in the gardens and want to settle in the neighborhood towns of Tinsukhia and Tejpur. Also TV has destroyed tea life. No one plays games anymore. Socializing has become much less, planters are more into themselves than into one another.

Any message for the present day planters?

Yes I think one needs to be more humane today. Show compassion and good listening skills when dealing with the workers, as tea is not what it used to be yesterday. Times are different and exercising caution with care is important.

Also I would like to stress on physical fitness for the younger lot along with their entire families. Socialise, play games, have sporting events. The garden offers facilities in the form of golf, tennis courts and the swimming pools. Make full use of them.

Thank you so much !



Party at Anwar Minallah's bungalow, Balijan North T.E. 1951

DRESSING UP A TEA BUNGALOW

An impeccable home with not a thing out of place is what a tea home is like.

Add to it a fine taste and perfection at all levels, from the garden to the kitchen. The result is a remarkable home that can be a challenge to keep, for any woman.

Whether it is a table décor, bathroom interiors, or jalikamras, [name given to space created out of an extension of a bungalow, enclosed with a mesh all around], the finish is perfect. From beautiful linen to silver-plated tea strainer, silver sugar-tongs, electric kettle, tea measuring spoon, hour glass tea timer, gold and silver tea infuser, exquisite tea and milk cozies- a tea memsaab has it all in her collection. Similarly dinner napkins, lunch and cocktail napkins, doilies, tray covers, jug covers hand towels mats and

runners are the right weaponry for any tea lady.

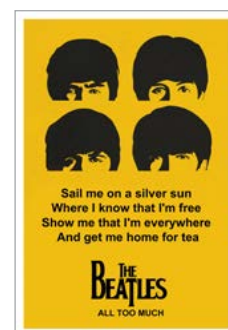
It is said that good, well starched white napkins, is like an introduction to the host for they leave a lasting impression on your guests and actually dress up a party. For the new young brides, strangers to the world of housekeeping and tea protocol, this may sound like an avoidable finishing nuisance, an idiosyncrasy, meaningless and confusing. But once she realizes the requirement, an interest in keeping a beautiful home develops and the new memsaab is all set to enrich her linen collection.

Accidents occur and here also it is no different. While serving meals, the sauce and the curry do at times play havoc on a paper crisp white cloth; but nonetheless

an estate washer man comes and does the magic trick and surely the stains disappear. Even the lipstick marks could be anyone's Waterloo! Courage in the face of adversity!

The hand towels are another, much important, indispensable part of tea living. From the guestroom to the bathing space right up to the kitchen, towels are great accessories to welcome your friends with. Many of our tea housewives have personalized their own towels by getting them monogrammed with their initials or embroidered with their favorite designs.

So get yourselves ready for a delightful table setting where the mood and the whiff of the candle linger on.



TIDBITS

1. Does one drink tea or take tea?



One drinks tea. During the Victorian era, the term to take tea was used by the lower classes and considered a vulgar expression by the upper classes.

2. Why is the shape of a teapot different from a coffee or chocolate pot?

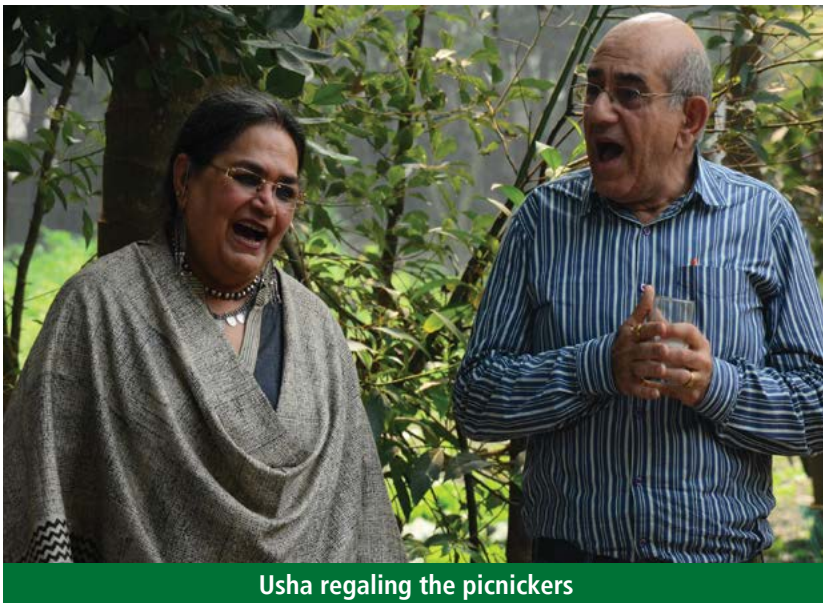


The teapot is designed with a lower rounded body to insure the tea leaves have the proper room for expansion during the infusion process. The lower placement of the spout on the vessel allows for the tea to be poured without interfering with the leaves.

PSEI Picnic 7th Feb 2016



Time to ponder



Usha regaling the picnickers



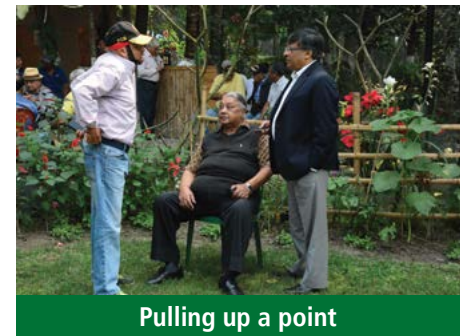
Shhhh --lovely ladies behind us !



Veteran picnickers



The fun brigade



Pulling up a point



Keeping an eye



Appy- Happy



The 'Real' man behind the bar



A relaxed moment



Music, masti and magic in the air



Happy moments, great camaraderie and a beautiful day



Masterful moves



Where is the Beer?



Ek chatur nar Ek hoshiar



Beautiful winter sun and a rapt audience



Founder President giving tips to Swapan Dutta



Housey in progress

LIST OF EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS : 2015 / 2016 & 2016-17

Sl No.	Name	Designation	Contact No.	Mail ID
1.	Mr. Deepak Atal	President	98310 11767	deepak.atal@amalgamated.in
2.	Mr. Sunil Munshi	Vice President	98300 19050	smunshi@yuletea.in
3.	Mr. Ajay Kr. Singh	Hony. Secretary	98318 25150	ajaymzt@gmail.com
4.	Mr. Swapan Kr. Dutta	Hony. Treasurer	99320 16669	skd@contemporary.co.in duttask2004@gmail.com
5.	Mr. Dilip K. Moitra	Jt. Hony. Treasurer	(033) 2473 1999 93398 71046	moitradilip2015@gmail.com
6.	Mr. Arup Chowdhuri	Ex-Officio-Member Past President	97487 46810	arupchowdhuri@gmail.com
7.	Mrs. Kiran Grover	Member	98300 45099	groverkiran@hotmail.com
8.	Mrs. Brenda Dennis	Member	90070 53876	bdennis_2007@hotmail.com
9.	Mr. A.K. Chowdhuri (Babloo Da)	Founder Member	98300 69792	akchowdhuri@hotmail.com
10.	Mr. Vijay Singh Panwar	Member	94351 70841	vijaysingh.cghat@gmail.com
11.	Mr. Rudra Chatterjee	Member	99038 18594 (033) 2248 4437	rudrachatterjee@gmail.com debasmita@luxmigroup.in
12.	Mr. Dhruva Guha Sircar	Member	99039 88471	dhruvags@yahoo.com
13.	Mr. S.R. Mukherjee	Permanent Invitee	98313 57693	(033) 2377 2080
14.	Mr. Arun N. Singh	Invitee Member	99030 00999	ansingh@goodricke.com
15.	Mr. C.S. Bedi	Invitee Member	98310 39904 (033) 2290 3035	cs.bedi@rosselltea.com
16.	Mr. A.K. Bhargava	Invitee Member	98313 10814 (033) 2217 1744	akbhargava@apeejaygroup.com

FUTURE EVENTS. PLEASE BLOCK THE DATES.

**Mid Rains Get Together on Sunday 17th July 2016 . Venue: Northampton Hall, Masonic Hall, Park Street from 7 pm.
Annual General Meeting on Friday 23rd September 2016. Venue Tollygunge Club at 7 pm.**

Editorial Board: Anju Munshi, Brenda Dennis, Kaustuv Bhadra



Registered Office:

3D, Satyam Chamber. 460, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road, Kolkata - 700 016, Ph : 033 2226 0306, Website : www.planterssociety.com