

## THOMIANS NEAR AND FAR

The backdrop, the tapestry of the energizing spirit that had been generated over in the playing field at the SSC grounds in Colombo on Friday and Saturday during the annual “Battle of Blues-2009”, served well to regenerate the enthusiasm among a decidedly motley crew of ‘older men’, namely the “Thomian Freshmen of ‘59” also known as the “Mandarin Batch”. For those unaware –the first day-and-a-half of play at the Royal –Thomian match was an unqualified disaster from an STC perspective. But, an outstanding if not amazing late rally saw the Thomians steer the game in a completely unexpected direction. Commendably, the game was ‘saved’ albeit drawn, and the Thomians were accorded the fullest glory of having sunk their stakes despite the intervention of ungovernable surprises that define the glorious illogic of cricket.

The Mandarins, separately, had been planning for months –easily six to seven months of regular effort on the part of a few of our number –to bring together our classmates in a fabulous reunion, and thereby to mark the passage of a full 50 years since the adornment of ourselves with the mantle of Thomian-ness. For it was in the spring of 1959 that our age group (born in the year 1951/1952) entered school-life proper, either at Standard One at St. Thomas’ Preparatory School, Kollupitiya, or Form One (Lower School) at STC Mount Lavinia. For the present reckoning, we were counted as ‘belonging’ if we were together in 1963 in the Lower Fourth Form at STC, and further, had we been as ‘one batch’ in that winning year of 1964 (When STC won the Battle of the Blues under the leadership of the late Premalal Gunasekera), and were in classrooms on the same floor of the Middle School in the Upper Fourth Form, then, we were of the “Mandarin” clan.

The first of the reunions, it was planned, would be a ‘stag’ affair; the next would be to meet on Sunday the 15<sup>th</sup> (Nalin Jayasuriya referred to it aptly as the ‘Ides of March’ –but significantly was far more propitious for us than it had been for a hapless Julius Caesar, centuries previously!) for a meeting at College, first for a Service at the Chapel of the Transfiguration, and then to assemble for a Group Photograph of those in attendance and belonging to the Mandarin batch, followed by a meal at the College Dining room, complete with a menu consonant with the bill of fare customary in the 1960’s i.e. uninspired and of doubtful nutritional value! The Sunday would conclude with a gala banquet organized at the California Grill (Roof Top) of the Galadari hotel in Colombo, from 7.pm onward at which spouses and offspring were invited to join the ‘men’.

### *In the meantime*

There was a need to galvanize the group into forming a frame of mind that would inspire some action. Our numbers were a total in the region of 200, and many were overseas. There was not even a complete list of our classmates within the shores of Sri Lanka and little knowledge of where these were or what they did, professionally speaking. Above all, was there likelihood that such a disparate and widespread coterie would be inclined to meet and greet each other or feel sufficiently ‘connected’ to want to make the effort to assemble as planned?

In determining the answer a nexus was imperative, a fulcrum on which the effort would pivot toward measurable success. A casual attempt, it was clear, would not prevail against the inertia. Therefore, the ebullience of S.I.Jayasekera (Sriyan) came into play, as he relentlessly pursued his *magnificent obsession* of compiling a massive list, indeed, a roll of the Freshmen of ’59. It was a daunting task, and it was one that he voluntarily took on himself unleashing a barrage of letters, telephone calls and emails with a manic determination to ferret out our fellows from the decaying woodwork of time and circumstance. He touched off a fusion of similar sentiment that lurked in the heart and mind of a few more of fellow Mandarins in just the right mix.

Sriyan’s vitality and interest was matched by the measured and persuasive dignity of K.R.Ravindran, the quiet and generous propensity of Arul Gnanam, the easy and spiritedly voluble enthusiasm of Nalin Jayasuriya, the dogged fiscal propriety of Chandrakumar Ramachandra, the temperate workmanship of Air

Vice Marshall G.Y. de Silva (Kalagolaya), the optimistic and smoothening influence of Dion Jayasuriya, and importantly, the muscular resolve of Jeya Rudra (sometimes referred to as ‘John’ Rudra for reasons extremely strange!). These stalwarts worked over the weeks poring over the initiatives, the documents, the ledgers, the directories and the googleonics of life and limb. They also exhibited extraordinary hospitality during the entire ‘birthing’ process. Spurred on were they to greater sacrifice with valiant encouragement from overseas as well, from the likes of Milroy Berenger in Sydney, Dr. Deepal Lecamsawam in Adelaide, Indran Mylvaganam in New Zealand, E.R. Hensman in the UK, Ponna (T.P.) Thurairatnam in Canada, Aji Rajendra in the US and more too numerous to mention here.

Soon, it was evident that the magic was working as Mandarins from here, there and everywhere began to bestir themselves from their Rip Van Winkleian state and were sharing information and details of themselves and others of the cohort and even volunteering themselves to chase after the mists and dust of previously cherished, but now dimmed memory. A trickle yielded a flood, and soon the majority of our batch was traced, located and listed. Sadly, a large number (estimated at above 25) were discovered to have passed on, all prematurely but some unnaturally and others of unexpected ailment. There was now an additional project that loomed and seemed apt –a directory!

Six years previously, two of our Mandarins had already started on ‘locating’ our fellows, namely Niranjan Kodikara and Lalith Amarasekera (Lalla). On the foundation they had so decorously laid, the updated directory was the more easily compiled –albeit with the spending of much time and the payment of humongous bills in telephone calls both locally and long distance!! A labour of love, but worthwhile and rewarding in the end. It proved true that time had not dimmed our essentially human response to want to belong in a tribe, to gather in unity with a shared memory or common pride, an encompassing family despite our obvious variations in caste, creed, form and aptitude, inclusive in our exclusivity. Even the phrase ‘class-*mates*’ took on meaning!!!

### ***Mission set in motion.....***

The direction in which the plans were headed now seemed firm and right. But, was this to be a mere get-together for reminiscence or was there to be something substantial that would result of all this effort? This was debated by the ‘committee’. Some Mandarins felt that little in the way of lasting ‘good’ would come of this. Others felt that a ‘jolly good time’ may be all that is necessary, and we should just ‘be like we were, in short trousers and behaving like the scalawags we had been’. Yet others figured that since we had arrived at our seniority (retirement, by and large, is at 55!!), it would be proper to convene with our spouses in hand. Some felt that this would somehow be too ‘restrictive’ even embarrassing in case of unwitting inebriation. The pros and the cons analyzed, the plan developed as outlined above. Rather than just one meeting at one location, there would be three, accommodating all shades of opinion. Further, the backdrop of the Battle of the Blues would serve to bring the fellows to Colombo.

And so it did! In fact, there was an electric response from many overseas Mandarins. They vowed they would join us at this festive Golden Jubilee –in the end we had four who were actually able to travel on time and be here; Neomal Wijesooriya and Niranjan de Silva from the UK, Ranmal Rodrigo (K.R.P.) and Hiran Cooray from Australia, and Lakshman Rajakaruna from Saudi Arabia.

Rudra opened the flat roofed facility at his imposing ‘Rudra Residencies’ in Wellawatte for our Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> meeting. It was good, it was fun, and provided moments to savour and no one seemed bothered by the sheets of rain filling the evening. The attendance was not necessarily overwhelming, but especially with our brethren from overseas on board, it was such a ‘great feeling’ to belong. Stories were swapped and backs were slapped, glasses clinked, ice dispensed and flagons of liquid poured freely and generously, and above all, games were played –“can you recognize me?” was an oft-heard ice-breaker (in the metaphorical sense) when conversation froze upon espying a wizened visage or receded hairline.

Rudra's most tolerant lady felt impelled (?) to ply us with a memorable fish curry that went admirably well with the piping hot thosai, masaala, peas, chutneys and all the congruent accompaniments that make hunger so worthwhile an enterprise even when judgment is a tad blurred by alcoholic ingress. For certain, we had professional caterers, and that too from a Thomian 'source'; our classmate Giri (Giridharan) has familial links with the establishment 'Shanmugas' that supplies South Indian fare, and Mrs. Rudra supplied the 'extras'.

The Sunday best in togs and ties saw a sizeable gathering of our men and their wives and in a few instances, children too, who were duly and imperially introduced to the Mandarins at the College Chapel. The service was led by Archdeacon Chrisantha Mendis in a very formal and impressively ritual order of morning worship, and was assisted by the College Chaplain in a signal departure from the custom of yore, as the Chaplain *incumbent* is a Rev. **Mrs.** and her name is Rebecca Matthew born overseas and of European stock.

The solemn occasion had the participation of two of our own Mandarin men, Air Vice Marshall Laksen Salgado (J.L.C.) and Mr. Arul Gnanam who read the prescribed Scriptural excerpts within the prayerful order. And later, Sriyan Jayasekera intoned with endearing gravitas the obituaries of those that have passed on from our tribe.

G.Y. and photographer organized the assembly on the steps leading to the chapel. The photographer soft spoken and retiring by nature, prompted G.Y. to wax 'stentorian' in his attempt to instill some discipline and orderliness into the proceedings. Finally, the photograph was captured, not stately, but getting there!

From thence to the realm of the famous (infamous?) dining chamber, as yet unsullied by time or the hand of an artificer. The tables, the benches, the accommodation for the Warden and staff, all remain as they were in the 1960's. Perhaps the sands of time have only succeeded in brushing away the dour presence of Mr.L.S. Gauder, but the 'ambience' (if there ever was) was decidedly familiar. Mandarins and their spouses and the occasional offspring in attendance, relished the experience of the 'boarders' lunch'. There was Ashroff Razak and Mrs. Razak, here was Nalaka Colambage, and over there was John Attygalle, then too, Sarath Abeykoon and R.G.A.Perera...and....Anil Wijeyawardene and his wife Sharma (former Miss Sri Lanka-1983) with daughter and son in tow....Terrence Pendigrast and his bride...and...Mr. & Mrs. Ajith Algama!!!!!! This was the stuff of legend! We talked and laughed very loud, and explained to those 'others' the pros and cons of 'boarder' life, and the resultant strange complexities arising from inadequate nutrition but which poses a paradox of outstanding sportsmanship displayed by many despite the claims of starvation.

Johnny Attygalle had on hand a T-shirt, clean and white, upon which all the Mandarins were invited to place their signatures using the indelible-ink pen provided for the purpose. This will serve as a Memento for as long as the fabric remains. It felt good to be.

### ***....toward the Goal***

The post-meridian assembly on Sunday the 15<sup>th</sup> was in the superlative glow of subtle lighting and urbane circumstance at the Five Star venue, the Rooftop restaurant at the Hotel Galadari Colombo (General manager- A Thomian, albeit of a slightly later vintage to ours).

Upward of 100 were present and included the ladies, and again some children too representing the 'next generation'. How wonderful to share this special landmark in time. Rama (C. Ramachandra) well captures what he felt when he wrote: "all our efforts over the past six months were fully worth it - the end products were fantastic. I think the wives enjoyed themselves as much as we did. They saw the great traditions that we were brought up in."

The special invitees at dinner were Warden Ponniah (just retired but had traveled home to watch the Battle of the Blues) and Mrs. Ponniah, Sub-Warden and Acting Warden Mr. Harshana Perera and Mrs. Perera, and Headmaster St. Thomas' Prep school Kollupitiya, Mr. Yohesan Casie-Chitty and Mrs Casie-Chitty. All others sat wherever they chose and mixed as they pleased in merry camaraderie.

Niranjan de Silva from the UK felt moved to write: It was marvelous to meet so many of my old mates, some I had not met since leaving school.

It must have taken a monumental effort to organise the day where everything seemed to flow so smoothly. It was gratifying to note that somethings in life dont change, the dining hall food for instance and the sense of humor of some of my old mates!

The formal dinner was well attended. The food and the ambiance was just right and the eloquence of the speakers, the trip down memory lane etc just gave you the feeling that you were a part of something very special.

Yes, it was something special!

We had opportunity to take a backward glance, not just as an exercise in nostalgia, but rather more compellingly to recognize from whence we have sprung, the studio wherein our collective character was fashioned. We reviewed the attitudes, the demeanor, the ability to differentiate the right from the wrong and treasured the memories of ones that surrounded us with both mild and tough measures at hand in the moulding process, parents, teachers and colleagues who inspired.

We were able to recognize those that may have fared miserably at their grades but nonetheless moved on to lead and direct. We spoke with pride of academics and outstanding achievers of our generation, we marveled at what we remembered of Prof. A.P. de Silva at school, and of Dr. Bochin Shu, Ph.D. who has contributed in no small measure to astrophysics. And all too briefly remembered how brilliantly B.G.S. de Silva ('Batta' to most and Doctor to some) straddled the two worlds of sport as well as scholarship. We appreciated the bankers, the financiers, the CEOs the Corporate leaders spawned by our generation, we remain astounded at the commitment to College on the part of Jayampathy Peiris and his wife Virginia –JB entered STC in 1959 and still is at College, albeit as a member of staff!!! His Wife Virginia also contributes by being involved with College though currently is at St. Thomas' Prep. She too has been imbibing deeply of the "Thomian spirit" nearly two decades. An outstanding 'record', admittedly.

The slides and the photographs lovingly collated and brought to light just enhanced the pleasure and the impress of the evening. We trusted the veracity of the photograph that shows two mature men in New Zealand (Hilman and Berenger) still holding on to their past as they preserve the very tin trunks that housed their worldly belongings when they were in the College Boarding decades ago, and which to them is the singular artifact that underscores their having had no home but the 'home' at College!!

Had the constraints in time not been as demanding as they were, we might well have heard all the stories of all two hundred of our batch of Freshmen '59. But alas, we could only touch upon the smallest sampling. We value them all, not for what the world addresses them as or how their bank balances project them, but rather for what they are in the context of our individual lives. Our friendships and our bickering, the common pursuits and the fisticuffs, owning up and blaming, forgiving and forgetting, the cheering and the jeering all made us become what we collectively are. Rohan Bogoda summed it up well, when he said: "There will never be a class such as ours. We were Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Muslims, and none of those things have ever mattered to us. We learned to speak the truth and we knew when we lied. We had standards to aspire to and parents who presided over our comings and goings and teachers who knew the right from the wrong and strove to instill these values in us, even though we may have been inattentive." But such things have sadly fallen by the wayside. We find it hard to cope with present realities. The unmannerly surliness that defines present day conduct and the prevailing crisis of leadership (deficit of leadership?) only proves that we had something else, something far better.

Warden Ponniah in his speech at the banquet spoke broadly on similar lines. He was able to recognize that our batch had something of lasting value to offer. We may not have measured up to the vision charted by the Founder Bishop Chapman, but we certainly have proven that we have got what it takes to survive with

dignity in a crumbling world, the requisite equipping of ourselves to challenge the present realities without losing our heads or our principles. His toast was followed by a response from the suavely mannered K.R. Ravindran, the only Sri Lankan ever to be inducted among the International Board of Directors of Rotary International.

Ravi spoke of many things and much in jest. But he spoke with deliberate poise and eager purpose when he lamented the slow but sure debasement of Sri Lanka into a morass of despondency. The very same corrosive emotion that has driven two thirds among our batch of classmates to live and work overseas. The pride of our class can scarce contribute to the welfare of our motherland, for they cannot feel themselves at home here, optimistic or secure besides. He presented the case that had Sri Lanka been directed by Thomians or by the Spirit of St. Thomas' this land would be far different, for our experience proves the exception that marks us.

He posed the idea that we can still make a difference in the lives of young scholars hard pressed and parents hard pushed to meet their aspirations because of mismanagement or misfortune. He spoke feelingly of those affected by missed chances and those losing out on their potentiality to be achievers because of deprivations that leave them with bleak horizons. It was a noble idea that Ravi proposed that the Thomian Freshmen of '59 could set-up a Scholarship Fund of approximately three million rupees collected from those of our tribe, within the shores of Lanka or be they in other lands. These Funds will be held in Trust and managed by the Warden of St. Thomas' College or by the Board of Governors. It will be a legal entity properly bound to oversee and review the progress or otherwise of the beneficiaries namely needy students in St. Thomas', and careful and prudent management of the funds will be part of the chartered mission.

Written Pledges were accepted at the Banquet, and the response so far has been handsome. There is more to be achieved with regard to the target set. But the spirit we alluded to will surely make things happen, as indeed things did with regard to this Golden Jubilee Year Celebration.

The post prandial remarks came from one of Sri Lanka's most celebrated Management Trainers and Corporate Consultants serving business enterprises in Sri Lanka and overseas (The European Union no less!!!) Nalin Jayasuriya, as he wound up the impress of the evening and recalled its setting and the many tireless hands that had made it happen. Clearly, it had been a memorable evening and there was no one factor that made it so, save for the collective generosity and the range and the scope of the Thomian spirit that firmly resides with the Freshmen of '59!

The evening concluded with the College song with accompaniment provided by the orchestra in attendance. It was a slow and desultory reading of the song, and that, for the lack of rehearsal and practice on the part of the musicians. Then, as if energized by a bolt of lightning, Sub Warden Harshana Perera leapt agilely on stage and demanded a repetition with verve and gusto and loudly led the echoes ringing by singing himself! What a wonderful way to end the show!!!!!!

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