

BY DILIP D SOUZA ('87 ECO INSTRU)

Fits BITS

In business, in the community and in every other realm of life, BITSians continue to make an impact in eclectic ways.



Things have a curious way of going round. A couple years ago, a few of us organized a BITS alumni meet here in Bombay. Among various things, we came up with the idea of honoring two BITSians at the meet. One, someone who has done well in technology or the corporate world, as might be expected of a normal BITS graduate. Two, someone who has done well in a completely different realm, as might not be expected of a normal BITS graduate.

Then again, given that celebrated broad-based BITS education, the second might also be expected.

In any case, for our "off-the-usual-track" honoree at that meet, we chose **Shashi Warriar**: the 1981 MA Economics graduate who has taken to writing thrillers and novels. (Check his little gem, "Hangman's Journal"). One year later, we had another Bombay alumni gathering, and we did the same thing again. This time, our choice was Ramesh Ramanathan, the once-high-flying Citibank executive who now runs the citizens' organization Janaagraha in Bangalore.

It was a good start, those two. We wanted this to become something of a Bombay alumni meet tradition. Which it might have, but for one problem. We have had no more Bombay alumni meets. Just those two.

Nevertheless, in early October this year, I was tickled to find myself on a panel with Shashi Warriar -- and then, less than 48 hours later, on a panel with Ramesh Ramanathan. Tickled because it's hardly as if I'm on panels all the time; yet these two in quick succession featured three BITSians, and these two in particular.

Why were they on these panels? Warriar won first prize in an Indian Express/Citizens for Peace essay competition on new ways of looking at secularism. As part of the prize distribution function, he and I were part of a panel discussing the themes that had emerged from the contest. Then Ramanathan and I were the speakers at a seminar session on democracy and peoples' participation, a subject he is eminently qualified to explore.

And as I sat behind tables listening to Warriar and then Ramanathan, they will forgive me for admitting here that I didn't give them quite my full attention. Because a part of my mind was marveling at the coincidence of it all; then marveling some more at the paths these random BITSians have taken over the years; then marveling still more at how these paths managed to converge for a brief spell, only two days apart. And I marvel most that it is BITS that underlies all this. BITS, the good old "engineering" college.

I don't mean to sound my little trumpet here, but with that said, consider some events from the first ten months of this fifth year of the 21st Century. Ramanathan's Janaagraha embarked on a major effort to check the veracity of Bangalore's electoral rolls. BITSians won two major writing competitions in India -- me, the Outlook/Picador confiction prize last February; and Warriar, this Indian Express/CfP prize in October. After the tsunami, BITS alumni in Chennai adopted two Tamil Nadu villages and put in motion some carefully considered long-term development plans there. As part of that, curiously enough, they actually were involved in the effort to set a Guinness record by planting over 250,000 trees in a day. What's more, the old record of some 80,000 trees had a BITS connection as well: the District Collector who suggested it in 2002, **Sudeep Jain**, is a BITS alumnus. And just for good measure, **S Nagarajan**, yet another BITS alumnus, topped the Civil Services exam this year.

There's plenty more where all that came from, I'm sure. But I'll stop there. That's an eclectic enough list of achievement.

We all like to look back on our alma mater days with rose-tinted nostalgia, and understandably. In hindsight, everything about BITS -- calculus classes to practice school to endless cups of *chai* -- invariably seems terrific to us. Of course, at the backs of our minds we know it likely wasn't and isn't quite as rose-tinted as all that. Yet I imagine the greatest tribute to BITS, to the kind of education we all got there, lies in the great variety of paths its alumni have taken.

So you'll find the telecom tycoon, but also the novelist. The venture capitalist, but also the effective and respected bureaucrat. The highly rated business professor, but also the guys who find innovative ways to clean up after a tsunami. There's nothing very profound in pointing all this out, I know; and besides, to readers of these pages it's all familiar anyway. Still, there was something delicious in the very act of sharing public space with two of these off-track alumni within two days. There was also a quiet satisfaction in knowing that we had picked these two to honor, at our gatherings. And then, sitting on that panel with Warriar beside me, I remembered one final delicious detail. When we invited Warriar to our alumni meet, he arrived in style. He drove up from Coimbatore -- on a gleaming Royal Enfield Bullet motorbike.

Fits BITS, wouldn't you say?



Dilip can be reached at ddd@rediff.co.in