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You Only Live Twice: A Tale Of Renewal

Musings on the nuances of our BITSian journey.

There once was a group of people with a simple notion – to go back in space and time on a journey of rediscovery. And if, along the way, the path led them through the delights that are to be had by raising a glass with a friend, then they were more than adequately prepared to take that path. And so they converged on the place of their youth, some travelling under the star-lit night of the North Indian skies, others braving the dust and heat of the semi-arid landscape.

But I get ahead of myself. The tale actually begins thirty years ago, when members of the very same group braved the very same passage through the hinterland to arrive dusty, bedraggled, and bewildered at the gates of a great institution. Those first memorable steps would lead them into an adventure like no other. One where they would enter as boys and girls, and would leave as men and women. Confident, poised, accomplished, world-aware. In short, they left as leaders.

But the adventure offered more than the opportunity to acquire the qualities of leadership. So much more. Here were formed bonds of deep friendship, appreciation of the uniqueness of us all as individuals, and the beginnings of the understanding of our purpose in the vastness of the Cosmos. Here were enjoyed the simple pleasures of sipping a hot beverage on a chilly winter's night. Here were spent hours in that pastime known to them as

lacha-ing, where topics of discussion ranged from the profound to the mundane, from the nature of God to the nature of girls, from music to philosophy, from food to girls, from the sublime to the erotic, from things that made them laugh to girls, from... well, you get the idea.

Some went on to wield great influence in matters of State. Others became champions of industry. Still others became the shapers of young minds in internationally renowned institutions of learning. All went on to raise families. Yet through all the challenges of life they retained their sense of place, staying grounded in the simple truths to leading a good life. And that, so many years later, is what brought them back on their journey of rediscovery. And so they embarked, in carloads and busloads, going back to the place where they all learned the important lessons of life.

When they met it was like a clash of the Titans. It seemed like neither hell nor high water would be able to keep them apart, such was the depths of their enthusiasm and joy.



Despite the effects of time and ample supplies of good food they recognized each other instantly, and pounced on each other for warm embraces as their spouses looked on with mild amusement. The halls echoed with the sounds of laughter and the slapping of backs and, yes, *gaalis* spoken with the utmost affection for friends not seen for twenty-five years – as if in gentle reproach to the target of the swearwords for having stayed away for so long. The years melted away in a velvety smoothness, creating a placid tide on which they all floated. Old ties were immediately re-established, new ties formed. And all through it they caught up and reminisced and took pleasure in the company of people who shared a common, life-shaping experience. They were rambunctious and raucous, yet reflective and thoughtful. They sang and danced, but shared their life stories. They drank through the night, but were courteous and mindful of the wives and children of their classmates.

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And then began the exploration of their old hunting grounds. Bhavan rooms were revisited, the new occupants regaled with stories of by-gone days. Classrooms were peeked into, bringing back a flood of memories. The Insti, the new Library, the Museum and its lawns, the Saraswati *mandir* were all examined under a critical eye and deemed to have become none the worse for the passage of time. But most of all they congregated in droves at their familiar watering holes - Connaught, Nutan, Skylab. Alas the PO Canteen and Bank Canteens were no more, and the places that had remained open were not the same. But then, neither were any of them. So it was with some wistfulness that they sipped their coffee and snacked on *dosas* and sat on plastic chairs, and remembered the days when Vinod's served piping hot *chai* and *samosas*, and they took their ease on *modas* and watched the pretty girls walk by.

In between it all they gathered once more in the dining hall that many of them had shared. There were the old favourites - *aaloo parathas* with *peeli daal* and *dahi*, *raajma* with *phulke ki roti*, *pulao* and French fries, the ever-popular fruit cream and cassata, even *supaari* and *paan* at the end of the meal. The quantities were generous, the service prompt and courteous. But the quality? You ask. What about the quality? Judging by the way they were putting away the food and the satisfied looks on their faces when they pushed away their plates, it was evident that they had no complaints. Was it because the quality of the food had actually improved in the intervening years? Or was it the

nostalgia that made the food taste Oh, So delicious?

There were felicitations and honouring of those that had guided us through the treacherous straits of academia. Speeches and acknowledgements, gift-giving and hand-shaking. And afterwards they partied. And how they partied! Some of their own were in the spotlight, belting out tunes of yesteryear, heartened by the enthusiasm of the crowds, paying little heed to the rust on their fingers from years of lack of practice. And what they gave to the audience, the audience surely gave back. With cheers and encouragement and calls for encores, they let their hair down and gave themselves to the night. And when the music was over and they'd turned out the lights they realized the evening was still young. As was the spirit inside them. And so they trooped back to the lawns, guitars and bottles in hand, and crooned the night away. Some even greeted the dawn with glasses of steaming *chai* in the now-quiet marketplace outside campus.



The Rs. 1.05 formula: One *samosa*, two *jalebis* and a *chai* at the PO canteen.

Daylight brought a sense of dread at what was to come. The single word that would capture the essence of the journey is “renewal” of friendships, of faith in each other and in themselves, of confidence that their life's voyage had not been in vain. And for these things they were grateful to the Institution that had fostered them and nurtured them at its bosom. And for these things they held their heads high, even as they partied with heavy hearts. How then, shall this tale end? Shall it end in the bittersweet of parting? Or in the promise of tomorrows to come? Or perhaps in the divine merging of the two? None has said it better than a member of that select group:
*Jis raaste se hum guzare the Aaj
phir wohi mo-de pe khaday hain
Kya din the, kya raat(ein) Ab jab
mil rahe hain yahin par To dil se
pooch Yeh hui na baat?*

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