

BY SAGARIKA JAGANATHAN ('93 BIO)

MOMENTS IN TIME...

Memories of what we presumed was the conquest of the Ganges, that turned the tables on us, capturing our hearts instead

I remember being asked to memorize Oliver Goldsmith's poem, "The Village Schoolmaster," while in middle school. Its last verses have haunted me ever since: "And still they gazed, and still the wonder grew, That one small head could carry all he knew."

In a way, these verses seem to characterize every one of us—the innumerable memories we carry with us as we cruise through life. We are like fireflies, flitting through a cornucopia of ephemera, shining, sometimes brilliantly, by virtue of those memory flashes. Not all of them are mindless trivia or knowledge worth its weight in gold. Some of those snapshots bring back days and events, frozen in time, that hold special significance in our lives. Only when we peel back the leaves of memory do we encounter a mulch of almost intact moments of profundity, carefully preserving the essence of certain events, people, and places whose charm and influence may have escaped us over the years. Such 'peeling back' may occur almost inadvertently or spontaneously, sometimes taking us back several years in time, impelling us to pause and appreciate the greatness of those defining moments that had a part to play

in who we are today. As Russian poet Alexander Blok once said: "True greatness can only be seen from far away."

Driving past yellow mustard fields during the perfect Californian summer of '98, I felt a sweeping sense of déjà vu. I was 22, and contemplated life's



big questions, having stepped out, just a year ago, from the comforting haven that was BITS, Pilani, into a whole new world, continents away. The startling riot of yellow hues took me to another drive, in the not so distant past...

The spring of '97. About ten or eleven of us, wide-eyed boys and girls, set out from BITS, traveling in a jeep, train, and bus to reach the rolling hills of Hardwar where the Ganges flows. Spirited, free, and crazy, we wanted to explore; try new things. We were ready to take on challenges the waters would pose...or not quite.

None of us had dreamed that white-water rafting would be part of our repertoire of BITSian experiences, when we nervously set foot on the Vidya Vihar campus, on day one at Pilani. But there we were, between sun swept hillsides, clumsily holding the oars, trying to navigate Mother Nature with help from a human guide—our rafting instructor.

The first hour or so of our adventure was a smooth sail, considering what lay ahead. We began to relax, taking in the beauty of the mountains; the sunlight danced on crystal clear waters broken unsteadily by our rowing. The water looked so inviting. Our guide said we could dive right in, helmet and vest, into the 100 feet deep waters in the stillest part of the stretch. "It's called Body surfing" he said, and promised that it would be like nothing we had ever known before.

I sat on the rim of the raft, clutching the tethering ropes—Afraid. Contemplating.

A piercing scream, two gulps of water, and a temporary sinking feeling—all of which lasted merely five seconds or so, but seemed like a journey to death's door and back—and my head bobbed up above water as I gaped at the two guys, my raft-mates, who had chosen to introduce me to the waters, with a shove. Noxious fear dispelled,

I joined the body-surfing entourage! We let the flow transport us to what seemed like paradise, until our guide beckoned for us to file on board. The last of us was reluctantly dragged aboard, as we paddled the oars again. What was a quiet murmur all along now magically metamorphosed into thunderous roars. The rafts began to go rough-and-bump over rocks propelled by currents that seemingly came from nowhere. We were in the rapids—each holding on to dear life while raging waters tossed our rafts like leaves in a storm.

We screamed when one of our friends, suddenly dislodged from the raft, landed right in the middle of the ruthless currents. We watched in shock as the savage currents—paying no attention to the fact that our friend here was a deft swimmer—tossed him around, threatening to dash him against the looming rocks. Our captain and guide steered adeptly, all the while screaming level-headed instructions, which we tried our best to follow. He gallantly rescued our comrade – all of us could have worshipped him!

Silence again. The rowdy waters had assumed a sudden gentility—a transformation one must witness to comprehend. The Ganges continued to tease and awe us, silent and serene one moment, a raging torrent the next. By the end of the day we were tired and spent, but I couldn't wait to come back for more. That night, the Ganges was in the fabric of our souls. We sat around a bonfire, a new closeness among us, for having fought, survived and eventually conquered the Ganges together. As the flames hungrily licked the embers, I gazed into the fire,

and then at the glowing, happy faces of my friends, laughing and replaying the days events. We were singing, talking, almost as if in a drunken stupor, as each of us wrestled with the unmistakable romance that charged the young night air, quietly perpetuated by the Ganges—her shimmering waters reflecting a full moon...

We woke to the sun streaking the eastern horizon—a ball of orange peering over the hills, ready to watch us launch into day two of our river adventure. As the day drew to a close—bonding to her ethereal beauty—we were unprepared to witness the heart-breaking debacle of soap suds and sewer flows ravaging the virgin waters of the Ganges. We arrived at people-infested Rishikesh, into whose ruinous arms she flowed...

Like all good things in life, our rafting adventure had to come to an end. We hauled the raft ashore; despite being simply pumped with air, its bulk surprisingly weighed down on our shoulders as we waded through shallow, murky waters. But a heavier load was on our hearts, as we grappled with fresh memories tugging at our heartstrings, beckoning us to go back to those ledges on Tiger Paw, where our adventure began.

On the train journey and the jeep ride back, the mood was contemplative. Although it seemed that we had fought bravely and survived the challenges posed by the raging waters, we felt anything but triumphant. It was the Ganges that ultimately conquered us...capturing our hearts: a realization that had only just begun to dawn on us. While we

knew we could not check the ruthless passage of time, we replayed those moments in our minds—moments recorded for posterity.

“We screamed when one of our friends, suddenly dislodged from the raft, landed right in the middle of the ruthless currents”

I've since driven past many yellow mustard fields; done a daring thing or two. But each time, my mind takes me to those fine days and fun-filled evenings on the banks of the Ganges, where we huddled around flickering flames, contemplating new relationships, old friendships, and the paradox of the simple yet complex life that we led behind the gates of Vidya Vihar.

BITS represents a significant milestone in my life—distinct and unique. No matter how many friends I made, which end of the CGPA spectrum they adorned, what events we were part of, I am, like the rest of them, bound to BITS by a common thread of collective nostalgia.

These days, whenever my mind retrieves snapshots during each of its unannounced forays into the past—revealing, time and again, that the essence of my experiences at BITS is etched in its reservoir of memories, constantly coloring those rare moments of epiphany—they never fail to make me smile.

