

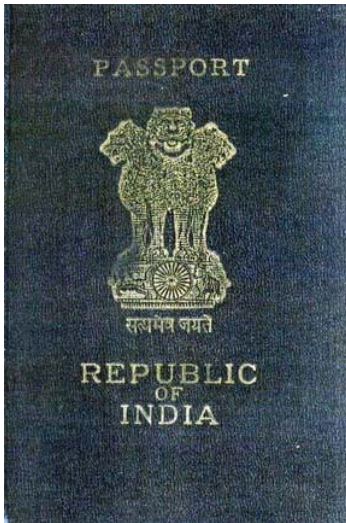
BY ANURADHA SHARMA GUPTA ('86 MMS)

TRANSITIONS – PART ONE

HOME OR THE PROMISED LAND

The diaspora debates and reflects upon the clichéd, yet emotion-filled subject of staying versus going.

INDEED, nothing is permanent except change. Not only is this a cardinal truth; it is part of many religious doctrines, the Bhagwad Gita for one. What does one look for then, when one transitions from one stage of life to another – a sense of comfort, of belonging, of stability or just the feeling of being a step closer to Maslow’s state of self-actualization?



Almost all of us have experienced post-BITS transitions – from being students in India to being students abroad, from one field of study to another, from being a student to becoming a professional, from being single to being married, from being married to becoming parents... you get the picture.

In this issue, we focus on a clichéd yet ever emotional subject: to stay or not to stay? Many of us leave India looking

for a better education, an adventure, better quality of life, broader experiences and so on. Some eventually head back. Some don’t. The adage of home is where the heart is does not always help, because the heart is often divided and fickle. In a state of suspended animation we try to decide where home lies, with a mix of rationality and emotion, with both left and right brain activity, Mars and Venus, weighing pros and cons, sometimes enlisting the advice of others, often going solo, or just procrastinating endlessly.

TRANSITIONS

This series explores the views of people with different types of experiences, records the feelings they worked through while in the midst of significant change. We encourage you to share your experiences with the alumni community.

Arvind and Priya, a BITSian couple from the ‘94 batch who returned to Bangalore after a satisfying stint in the US, discuss their experiences with us -- a moving account that triggers a debate in right earnest.

Arvind and Priya, on returning to India:

“Most NRIs frequently keep telling themselves and others who care to listen that they will definitely return to India. Their reasons for leaving the land of opportunities are plenty. For some it is the overpowering guilt of leaving their aged parents alone. For others, it is a feeling of not being able to fit into an alien social circle. For the really exceptional ones, it’s a genuine feeling of nationalism and the desire to serve in India. Whatever the reasons, for most, translating their desire into action and making the move seems to be a difficult task. Does this difficulty stem from the fact that the lure for lucre dominates over any other emotion or is it more complex than that?



“My wife, Priya and I grappled with this decision a couple of years back. We had taken the beaten path. Both of us had graduated from an engineering school, Pilani, taken our GREs and went to graduate school. We had a swinging time in grad school and had the good fortune of finding the right kind of a place to work in.

“The two-body problem from classical mechanics finds a ready analogue in the lives of married people. Two people, married to each other, with dissimilar career interests seldom find work in the same geographical area. My belief in this hypothesis had been vindicated by the presence of the many long-distance relationships I saw all around me. However, unlike many other couples around us, we were very lucky to find work within earshot range. We settled down to an idyllic life in suburbia. Life was good – clean air, well equipped gyms and not much of a rush hour to speak of. Both of us worked in research environments that gave us all the freedom and no pressure. We had a great bunch of friends with whom we saw movies and cooked potluck dinners. We traveled to all kinds of lovely destinations on long weekends. Our parents lived in Chennai and we contented ourselves with weekend telephone conversations with them.

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– K L Arvind ('94)

“As time passed, we found ourselves constantly longing for a more fulfilling life. It is hard



to explain to someone who has not personally experienced the feeling. The nagging discomfort when one weekend call reveals that a parent was unwell and a neighbor was kind enough to drive them to the doctor. All assurances that all is well now somehow fail to reassure. It sinks in even deeper, that if your parent requires your help or assistance or even just presence, it will take many hours of planning to get time off from work and looking for good flight deals and 24 long hours of travel before you get home. And then, you will be jet-lagged, sensitive to the weather, food, water and will probably need more looking after than those you had come to look after. And no sooner than you ‘re-acclimatize’, it will be time to start the long journey back.

“This aspect of life away from home is one that is readily articulated and well accepted as collateral damage – worth the sacrifice to live the good life. But is participating earning the big bucks all there is to the good life? Most get-togethers with friends during our stint in the US would see conversation turn to this topic at some time or the other. What is the quality of life in this home away from home that we were

trying to build ourselves? On the surface, it seemed great. But dig deeper, and put away the concerns over neglecting family and we found that we still had more reasons that were holding us back from continuing on the well-worn path of green-card-citizenship. We missed India. We missed belonging.

“So one fine day we took the decision to return home. It was just as sudden as it sounds. We grabbed the helm of our little boat that was happily cruising along and turned east. We never felt a moment's doubt. India. Home. This is where our happiest memories were. Nothing, not skeptical friends, not even the plea to rethink this decision of ‘throwing away our careers’ from our parents could shake us. We applied for jobs on Monster India. The timing was perfect, it seemed. We got good offers from Indian companies, submitted our resignations in the US and started packing.

“We came home to a bewilderment of contradictions. Bangalore seemed to have made tremendous progress, cell-phones, wireless connectivity, on-the-go cappuccinos and jazzy multiplexes. But at what price? Gone were the roads shaded by huge trees. Pre-independence bungalows had given way to unprepossessing apartments. Real-estate had sky

rocketed and the city's infrastructure looked incapable of handling the traffic loads.

“One of the metrics of progress is the ability of the new to co-exist with the old. Bangalore and most of urban India seems to have forgotten this. If the journey to the office was an ordeal, the scenario at home seemed to match it too. So far, we were used to being just by ourselves at home, no maid, no cook and no relatives. Suddenly there seemed to be a lot of people around and life seemed forever hectic. We loved having our folks at home, but hadn't bargained for the steady stream of relatives.

“At this ambivalent stage in our life, we were faced with a new proposition. I was offered a chance to transfer to the US. Memories of clean air, good roads and a quiet household came flooding back. We rationalized thus. We had given ourselves a fair opportunity (nearly a year) to look at life in India and it did seem like a lot of trouble. Maybe we made a mistake and should return.

“This time, we decided not to be hasty and spend some time understanding what we wanted with life. We would count the one month we spent deliberating on this decision as one of the most important periods in our lives. We realized we were getting so caught up thinking about little things like bad roads, traffic and pollution that we were missing the big picture. We were not counting the enrichment the people around us were bringing into our lives. When you walk down the street and the local cycle repair shop owner, now graying looks at you and recalls the time you rented a

cycle from him to learn cycling. You go to a barber-shop and realize that it is the same person who has been cutting your hair for the last twenty years. You meet the neighborhood grocer and he tells you how time has changed since he last brought provisions on a cycle to your house when you were a kid. The secret joy your parents feel that you are around.

“I feel that every decision has to be based on some sort of logic (personal or otherwise). Accordingly, there are ‘musts’ and ‘wants’ for everybody. For me at least, good health, safety and good education are ‘musts’. Sense of belonging, warmth and the like are ‘wants’.”

“These are feelings that can't be possibly quantified or rationalized. No amount of pesky relatives or "necessary social functions" can dilute the feeling of peace one feels with being home. You realize that the warmth and friendliness in your own country can never be matched elsewhere. This warmth is what gives you a sense of

belonging.”

Another BITSian elaborates on the emotional aspect of staying back in the US...

His wife is an Indian America, his children are American, he is British by birth, and he feels passionately about America as his second home.

“I'll tell you what Arvind and Priya's account quantified for me. I work in Corporate America where to move up, one needs to move around. It is a concept I abhor for personal reasons though I understand the business ones. I grew up in Delhi, watched the trees my now deceased father planted turn into trees and bear fruit, then turn into seeds and grow into trees again. Leaving our ancestral home for a new one, thanks to the price of progress and real estate in Delhi was, sooner or later, inevitable.

“I live in a house I love, although it is in America. I think about the trees I want to plant, when my children go off to college, I want to remember the many hours we spent talking on the stairs; I want the plants and the trees bear witness to the passage of our time together.

“In the new country that I call home, I am trying to build some constants



from my habitat, for this is the only potential constant for me. Although my barber, dhobi and grocer in Delhi are long dead, and the barber, the grocer and the dhobi will never have the same associations for me, my neighbors in the US will change every five years – spending more time in the house, by the trees, and with my immediate family are the best way for me to call this country home. For, everything else in this country is fleeting.

“For those of us (like me) who don't have the same choices as you (Arvind and Priya) did, who don't intend to ever leave, growing old in our new suburban house may be the only solution. An idea that somehow, I like very much.”

And, as yet another BITSian adds, there is of course...

“A fundamental difference in priorities between those who migrate out of compulsion, and those who migrate out of conviction. Most of us fall into the latter category. In my honest opinion, evaluating the pros and cons of living in the US/UK etc. versus India, is relatively immaterial. Conditions both abroad, and at home are conducive for well-educated people like us BITSians. I doubt we would be having this discussion if the IT boom in India hadn't happened recently.

“Having said that, I feel that every decision has to be based on some sort of logic (personal or otherwise). Accordingly, there are ‘musts’ and ‘wants’ for everybody. For me at least, good health, safety and good education are ‘musts’. Sense of belonging, warmth and the like are ‘wants’.

“There is no doubt that in terms of health, safety and education, India has a long way to go. Health and safety are obvious. Education is still a rat race in India, while it is relatively easy to get into some of the best universities here in the US.

“The sense of belonging that Arvind and Priya mention in their article is very real, and we certainly feel more at home in India than anywhere else. There are however, at least two aspects that need to be highlighted:

“The first and arguably the most important factor: Children. I've always known us Indians as a set of people who care more for the future of their offspring than for their parents. I believe that the best way to repay my parents is to be a good parent myself!

“When I think about moving to India, I imagine my 14 yr old kid asking me quietly one day, ‘Appa, you came back to India so you could have a sense of belonging. What about me -- why I am toiling so hard to get into a decent engineering school? Why am I unable to spend time on sports? Why did you make me pay?’ And I wouldn't have an answer.

“The real question in my mind is: Am I willing to make sacrifices for my kids? Or, do I expect them to make sacrifices about their career, so I could have my sense of belonging?

“Second, there is the possibility of striking middle ground. Some of my friends' parents stayed here until their children were able to fend for themselves (typically until they were in college), and then returned to their country. That way, they accomplished both things -- making sure their children got the best, and yet,

ensuring that they themselves can go back to where they feel they best belong.

“Also, I think that in the end, the most important thing is not whether you decide to stay or leave, but what you do after you've made that decision.”

Dilip D'Souza, who went looking for India after having found America – a journey that Columbus did not complete, provides another perspective:

“A thought-provoking discussion all right. You know, I moved back to India in 1992 after 10 years in the States, and to this day I get asked ‘why’ all the time. I had a green card (since turned in to the Consulate in Bombay), a cushy job, the respect (finally) of my colleagues, a nice home in a nice part of Austin, a fine dog -- well, why?



“But I do miss my dog.”

“I usually give two reasons: one, there were things – causes if you like – in India that I was beginning to care about and I felt I had to be closer to them. And two, I wanted to be closer to my parents.

“But after these years of offering those reasons, I have to say I'm never fully satisfied offering them. After thinking about it a lot, I suspect I moved back because of two other reasons:

“A vague, and growing, feeling of unease with my life in the States. Not that I disliked any aspect of it, but it was somehow just a little too

comfortable. Arvind and Priya allude to this too in their thoughtful essay. I felt, not always consciously, that I needed some challenge, some discomfort. By itself, this is not reason enough to move to India – I could have found such challenge in the States, or Ecuador, I'm sure. But it set me thinking about a change.

“A feeling that I'd find India most challenging of all. Fascinating and frustrating, yet challenging. Maybe it's because I write, I don't know: but I often feel it's the frustrations and perversities here that make this such an interesting country. I don't know really what 'loving your country' means, but I certainly love the challenge of daily life here. Now, and even though I look on the US fondly as a second home, I would never live anywhere else. But I do miss my dog.”

Pushkala, 95 MMS batch rounds off with an entirely different perspective of moving from India to US -- she merely catalogues, without getting judgmental, the pure experience that life's changes entailed:

“Going to the mess armed with flash cards, pacing up and down MB hallways memorizing wordlists is a familiar scene for 3rd year BITSians. Suddenly Barrons became more important to them than RAF movies and *lachha* sessions. However I never joined this 'clan'. I was eager to go out and start working. I often dreamed of myself as an important executive wearing crisp skirt suits and jet setting around the globe.

“Sure enough, I started working and it was great fun. Attending

meetings, having a secretary do the filing and mailing for you, lunches with colleagues, planning evening activities with friends was all great. All that money and freedom. Ah that independence was delicious! Coming home for holidays was the best part. I felt so important to be finally working. I loved buying gifts for the family. My proudest moments included discussing 'work' with Dad.

“I went to buy a bagel and the lady asked me, ‘What kind?’ I was perplexed and not wanting to sound stupid said ‘Round!’ ...”



“A couple years down the line, office politics, the routine of going to work everyday, the discipline of being a working adult began to wear me down and I longed for the carefree campus atmosphere. Lounging around SKY lawns under the warm sun, afternoon naps, juicy gossip and all the excitement of college seemed so inviting. At about this time I met my prospective husband and everything happened so fast. I was soon to go away to the US to start a new life. I decided to quit my job and do my Masters.

“The US! It didn't seem alien at all to me. I had tons of friends and family here. But life could not be more different. Everything seemed so still and quiet and hushed. Remember the movie 'Pushpak' where Kamal Hassan longs for the din of everyday life? That's how I felt sometimes. The houses looked picture perfect with well-manicured lawns and all that. I still remember I told my husband when he took me out for a drive – ‘Gosh these homes look like they have been taken straight out of a photograph’. The next few months passed in a daze. Learning to cook, doing the grocery shopping, weekend outings, throwing parties, meeting the in-laws, my first time skiing and just getting used to the fact that I was now married. I went absolutely nuts during the first snowstorm. It was a lot of fun. But I also missed home and my parents terribly. I missed the familiar sounds and my independence. Heck I couldn't even drive here. Thank god for the trains and school, I soon began to form my own circle of friends.

“The routine of classes, quizzes and tests started and everything somehow seemed to make sense again! One of my funniest Fresh-Off-Boat (FOB) stories is when I went to buy a bagel and the lady asked me, ‘What kind?’ I was perplexed and not wanting to sound stupid said ‘Round!’

“Having been employed, getting being married and then going to school have all been very different. Maybe you don't feel the same way as I do. But when you see the giggly girls and boys that have come here right after their undergrad you feel they are being silly. You suddenly reach out for those of your kind to share the newly married hubby stories in between classes. Fortunately for me I did have a good balance of both kinds of friends. The ones that took me to the wild undergrad parties and the others that shared *aloo paratha* and lasagna recipes with me. I think I liked that balance and I enjoyed going

to school. The academic system wasn't much different from BITS and that sort of helped me. The crowd was also not that different. Plenty of desis around. But it was also refreshingly different to meet students from various other places once a while. But being married and going to school can also be totally taxing. I had evening classes and a day campus job and tons of assignments to do. The weekends were full. There was always some project meeting or the other, and then there were always the household chores and some visiting to be done. I just got used to running around all the time.

“Life's transitions are inevitable and can be demanding at times. But it is all worth it isn't it? I feel it is something like opening your eyes to a new day. Sometimes you see bright sunny mornings and other times you see dreary dark ones.”

While a lot of what we report here might touch a raw nerve or strike a chord with some of you, the US is often considered the promised land, India has always been home for all of us and wherever we are, whatever we go through, a common thread binds us all, that of a shared history, not just of having lived in India but of having been part of Pilani, halooing days,

laccha sessions, Blue Moon Maggi, Sky Lab *chai*, interspersed with classes, music nites, an Oasis in our lives...

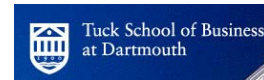
Whatever it is we transition through, life may seem like a journey but living in the moment is the biggest joy. On that happy note, we request all our readers to write in with their transitions -- in student life or careers, from careers to part time work, whatever; we invite you to share your experiences.

Share your views with us. Write to Anuradha Sharma Gupta (anuradha@bitsaa.org)



Is the BITS Alumni Network working for you?

Krishna Hegde ('96 Comp Sc)



In September '04, I joined Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth. For my post MBA career I wanted to work in the financial services industry but didn't know about specific roles or what it takes to get an internship on Wall Street. I remembered that Karthik Krishna (BITS '93) worked as Vice-President in the Fixed Income Desk at Deutsche Bank, New York. I sent him an email and told him that I wanted some guidance. On a Saturday afternoon, Karthik spoke to me for almost an hour and took me through the details of his work, told me what his firm looked for while recruiting people and what qualities made a person successful in his profession.

After a couple of weeks, I went to New York on a visit and he introduced me to people in his group. I got a first hand understanding of the job of a trader. Subsequently, I interacted with numerous BITSians in the same industry (Adri Guha, Ram Kumar, Nirav Shah, Rohit Khanna - all BITS '95 batch, Vikram Soni BITS '96 batch). Each of them was happy to speak to me and shared with me their experiences in the industry.

When BITSAA organized East Coast Oasis in November '04, I drove over 6 hours participate in the celebration. Meeting BITSians across batches and knowing what Pilani was during their times is always a joy. As I staffed the counter taking orders for BITSAA merchandize, a person came by looking to buy a cap. We got talking and it turned out that the person I was speaking to - Subramaniam Venkateswaran (Mani of 87C4 batch) worked as a Senior Vice President in IT at Lehman Brothers, one of firms I was targeting for my summer internship. On his invitation, the next time I visited New York I dropped by at his office. He told me what distinguished Lehman Brothers from other firms on Wall Street and put me in touch with some people he thought I should meet. Throughout the recruitment process, he has been extremely supportive and I recently accepted a summer internship offer at Lehman Brothers. The BITS alumni network played a huge role in helping me get a summer internship in trading without any prior experience in the field.

It's great to be a member of an extremely close-knit community that will support me years after I've left the hallowed gates of my alma mater.