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Newsletter from District Governor Rob Fowler to the Lions, Lionesses and Leos of District 410B, Southern Africa

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January 2007
Issue Ten

IMPRESSIONS OF INDIA AND THE 34TH ISAAME LIONS FORUM



International President Jimmy Ross with the assistance of IPIP Ashok Mehta branding a Group 1 DG with his JR logo

The Renaissance Hotel and Conference Centre in Mumbai was the venue for the **34th ISAAME Forum** held between the 30th November and 3rd December.

1200 delegates, mostly from India but also including Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri-Lanka and Lebanon and then a pretty large contingent of some 80 Lions from Nigeria, together with other Lions from Kenya, Congo, Ethiopia, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe attended the Forum. Our friend, DG Kebbie Kone from District 412 could, unfortunately, not make be there),

It was interesting to be the only representative from MD410. The Lions from the rest of our constitutional area are fascinated and genuinely interested in what we are doing in Southern Africa. I was really made to feel very welcome – like every other Lion was - but certainly missed my fellow DG's from MD410.

Our Lions lapel badge is a very special symbol which unites us in a wonderful bond of friendship despite our obvious and sometimes less obvious differences. Every Lion that I met was, without exception, very proud of their Lionism and their Lions leadership. I was also quite surprised at how many Lions are involved in the medical professions – male and female.

Many of the DG's that were there were from our original Boston "Group 1" and we met again with our group DGE training leader and now group mentor,

PDG Sangeeta Jatia (daughter of ID Prem Lahoti – who visited us in Nelspruit in 2000-2001 during his term as International Director). It is just amazing what some DG's have been able to achieve in terms of growth and service in their districts - despite the normal obstacles! We had a wonderful opportunity to share our Lions year with one another and with Sangeeta and IP Jimmy Ross who gave JR branded sashes to those DG's that had really excelled! It was really a very special and meaningful time for us that were there to all to be together again and share the common aims and the visions that we all have for Lionism in our respective districts back home.

I was proud to say to our assembled group that our administration is great, we have great plans for growth; our dues are up to date and Lions in District 410B enjoy and are committed to growing themselves and Lions voluntary service in their communities. We have great Lions in District 410B and we are positive that we will grow out of our transitional district status in the not too distant future.



Students getting ready for the impressive Forum Flag Ceremony

The Indian Lions sponsored the most amazing array of gifts for every registered delegate. A golf shirt made by GAP; a briefcase filled with Lions forum memorabilia including a weighty "Certificate of Attendance" enclosed in Perspex, to name a few!

ISAAME = "India, South Asia, Africa and the Middle East"



Of course the Forum provides a wonderful opportunity to see the senior Lions leadership up close and develop a real affinity for what they are trying to do for our grass root Lions and for the spirit of voluntary service that Melvin Jones set in motion for Lions Clubs International. There was ample opportunity to listen to International President Jimmy Ross and to again be motivated by his "We Serve" theme. The report to the forum by IPIP Dr Asok Mehta on LCIF was also just outstanding. International Vice President Mahendra Amarasuriya presented his personal theme "Challenge to Change" for next year to the forum in a very personal and encouraging manner. Of course it was also a wonderful time to reconnect with Lions that I had met in Boston last June and make new friends with special Lions from all over the ISAAME area not to mention meeting Oak Brook officials whose names I had only seen on the bottom of our infrequent correspondence. It was great to meet some of these tireless backroom workers at LCI in Oak Brook face to face.



The "Alluring Attitude" Lion in the entrance foyer

The evenings social activities planned for the delegates were just outstanding. Indian traditional dancers, a young popular female pop singer, a boy group singing and dancing their own latest chart hits. I felt like I was on center stage in a Bollywood scene! Everyone – young and old was dancing and getting involved in the wonderful Forum vibe.

The action on stage was relayed to three large outdoor screens and mixed by a team of audio visual fundi's so that the whole event seemed to flow like a well planned and well executed TV special.

To feed 1200 people at the same time in an outdoor venue is no easy task. The forum committee carried it off amazingly well for three nights. Delegates could choose between every style of cuisine in that

vegetarian to the variety. The caterers had their own tandoori ovens on-site and presented delegates with the freshest and most sumptuous and tasty food imaginable. It was an absolute feast of the most delicious Indian, Oriental, Korean and even Italian food. Cheesy Paneer Tikka, Dal Bukhara, Chicken Labaadar, assorted rotis, Thai Red Vegetable Curry, even tender Coconut handchurned Ice cream! That's just a small sampling from the evening event's menu!

The Renaissance Hotel then also provided mid-morning snacks and tea and coffee and lunch for all delegates. The variety and quality was also just amazing!. On the first day there was a problem with my nametag and the meal voucher booklet couldn't be issued until halfway through the lunchtime. This meant that I could not present my lunch voucher and get a dinner plate. I could, through, get in the queue for the "Thai Lemon Grass and Coconut Soup" which was served being served by the hotel waiter in glass mugs. A few sips of this delicious soup and I thought I'd gone to heaven!!

An amazing experience for me was at the close of the last evening's entertainment event. The supper and entertainment took place in a beautiful outdoor garden area within the Renaissance Hotel grounds. The Forum Convenor, Lion Shyam Malpani, in his white dinner suit, had, long before delegates started to leave, already taken up a position under a gazebo at the only exit from the function area. One by one as delegates left to go he thanked each one personally for their attendance and with a warm handshake presented every Lion delegate with his personal thank-you gift. The gift was a beautifully hand made clay figurine of the Forum mascot – an "Alluring Attitude" Lion made by children at a special school supported by Lions in India.



The range and quality of entertainment provided for delegates was just amazing

I had not planned any part of this trip before arriving in India but thought that the ancient city of Jaipur would be a good start since I had been loaned a Dorling Kindersley guide book covering that city, Agra and Delhi. I then met fellow KC Bansal during our DG presentations to IP Jimmy Ross at one of the forum sessions and he indicated that he would try and arrange to meet me at Jaipur airport. Anyway, the Forum closed all too soon and I then flew to Jaipur on the Sunday morning where I was met on arrival at Jaipur by Lion Vimal Baj from the local Lions Club of Jaipur Crystal one of 26 Lions clubs in the metropolitan area of Jaipur. In his hands he had a small parcel wrapped in newspaper. We'd hardly said our hello's when he unwrapped his little parcel and draped its contents - a beautifully fresh garland of bright orange Marigolds - over my shoulders.

We then drove to have tea and snacks at the home of the president and family of the Lions Club of Jaipur Crystal, Lion RB Vijay and his wife Lalita. It was the middle of a hot Sunday afternoon but their family welcomed me – a Lion stranger from South Africa – most kindly.

Later that afternoon Lion Vimal took me to his own home to visit his extended family comprising his three brothers and the children and also a number of elderly parents. That too was a wonderfully humbling experience. The Indian cricketers were being hammered in the one-day match at Centurion Park that afternoon so everyone was glued to the small TV in the family room - quietly lamenting the state of play!

Jaipur is a city with a rich heritage and was originally established in the early 1700's and is also known as the "Pink City" because most of the original buildings were carved from the pink sandstone that is found in abundance in the area.

Later that evening I had a wonderful time with DG KC Bansal, his wife Santosh and their family. His District 323 E-1 stretches for a distance of 1800km north and south of the geographic center that is Jaipur. We think we have problems getting to all our clubs in 410B! We had a wonderful evening. The beautifully bound and dust jacketed District 323 E-1 directory is an absolutely first class colour publication on Lionism that we would gladly put onto any coffee table, anywhere.

Following a day of sightseeing in Jaipur the next day and spending that night with Lion Vimal and his family at their home it was time to catch an early morning bus through the dry farmlands to Agra some 250km away.

After three hours the coach deposited me somewhere in that busy city where I was greeted by a number of rather exuberant taxi drivers and hotel touts all trying to do business with the only - and rather bewildered - tourist alighting from the bus!

By some strange fortune I found myself unloading my backpack and carrybag into a motorised rickshaw and being driven off into the city by a wizard of a man whom I got to know later as Harish Mishre. By his own admission the best guide and rickshaw driver in the whole of Agra! For two and a half days we raced – if that were only possible - though the crowded and bumpy streets of Agra! We viewed the beautiful Taj Mahal by sunset from across the Jamuna River and the following day was able to stand in awe at the foot of the long water feature into which its mighty columns and domes are reflected and then walk up through the gardens to the actual building itself. Each step brings more detail and a different vista until one is finally right there in the shadow of one of the truly great wonders of the world.



No photograph of the beautiful Taj Mahal in Agra can really do this architectural masterpiece justice. It is justifiably one of the great wonders of the world.



The ancient palace in the old City of Jaipur

From Agra I travelled on a night train to the holy city of Varanasi. Varanasi is located on the northern bank of the Ganges and is one of the holiest of Hindu religious sites. My friend and wild rickshaw driver Harish had asked me while we were stuck in one of the never ending traffic jams where I was going after leaving Agra and I said quite firmly "Delhi!" as that was where I had planned to go. He shook his head in dismay "No, no, no" he implored .. "you cannot go to Delhi until you have first been to my home town, the place where I was born - Varanasi!" This was not quite in my envisioned travel plans!

I had only seen black and white pictures in an old Time-Life book on India showing worshipers washing on the banks and in the waters of the sacred Ganges and other images of the Hindu funeral pyres! No amount of argument on my part could, however, dissuade Harish and when I capitulated he then set about getting to a travel agent to arrange the necessary travel details so that I would have enough time in Varanasi to visit the city of his birth and the city he loved before getting back to Mumbai in time for my connecting flight home.

That is how I landed the top bunk on the crowded overnight train between Agra and Varanasi and arrived in this holy city some 4 hours after the scheduled arrival time. Repairs to the busy line between the two cities had meant that trains had to wait their turn to use the single remaining line while the other was repaired.

A driver from the Hotel Buddha in Varanasi had been patiently waiting on the platform for me since 8am when the long delayed overnight train finally pulled into the main station. No one seemed particularly upset, or concerned, at the late arrival. There was a definite noise across the whole city. I asked the driver why it was so incredibly noisy. "There is power failure .." At first I did not understand his response then noted that just about every shop or business had a diesel generator bolted to

Lion Vimal Baj of the Lions Club of Jaipur Crystal with his Lion President Lion RB Vijay and family at home in Jaipur

Most of the residents in the old city of Varanasi continue to live as they have done for centuries. Narrow winding streets lined with tiny shops and "houses" scarcely large enough for a bed and a stove. Old withered widowers sit huddled under their cloths their hands trimming a small pile of flowers or cutting leaves. Others bent over, do the sweeping and pile the dirt in little heaps for someone else to pick up later. For them the problems with electricity in the rest of the city seem another age away and is of no consequence in their traditional ways.

To devout Hindus the flowing waters of the Ganges River are sacred. Many Hindus make a pilgrimage to the city so that they can be cleansed in its holy waters. The banks are lined with temples and stepped areas so that worshipers can get to the water with relative ease irrespective of the fluctuating water level during the passage of a year.

I was being rowed up the Ganges at sundown and being shown all the temples and River houses, called Ghats, for the various Hindu sects when I saw, not too far away across the water, what seemed like a very large fish. This seemed a bit strange and when I asked my rower what he thought it was, he said "a dolphin!". I was thinking – "that's just crazy" when a dolphin – a real dolphin – came leaping out of the water! This was really a dolphin. I was quite amazed. When I got back home I found, to my surprise, that there is a highly endangered fresh water dolphin known as the Ganges River Dolphin of which there are only about 1200, according to the experts, left in the world. To have actually seen one of these rare mammals in the Ganges and right opposite the Ghats of Varanasi was for me as uplifting as maybe the pilgrimage to these holy waters could be for any devout Hindu. The Ganges River Dolphin is nearly blind in adulthood and finds its food almost entirely by smell and by using its sonar. Pollution of its habitat and excessive hunting for its supposedly curative body oils has severely depleted their numbers.





Mahatma Gandhi statue in Jaipur



Harish - the best guide and motor rickshaw driver in Agra



DG KC Bansal of District 323 E-1 and his wife Santosh



The Ganges at sunrise

I do not quite understand the Hindu religion; the temples and the many gods that are revered so. It was very humbling, though, to see the many hundreds, if not thousands, of worshipers practicing their ancient faith in the ceremonies along the river.

Early the next morning to again be out on the water in a rowing boat watching the sun rise on the one side and on the other side having the followers quietly come down to bathe and collect their holy water for the day was quite special. There is something magical and deeply moving about putting a leaf basket filled with marigolds and a lit candle into that mighty river and letting it go so it can carry your silent prayers for family and friends and your own spirit down to the sea at the end of its course.

Attending the ISAAME Forum gave me an opportunity to meet wonderful Lions and to experience an organization in a very special way that does so much good through the gift of voluntary service in the name of Lions Clubs everywhere. The chance meetings with Lion Vimal, Lion President Vijay and DG KC Bansal and their families and with Harish and many others like him who said – maybe not in the same words but with the same deep empathy - “I know I am poor, but I am an honest and honorable guide!”

Their simple wisdom and our crossed paths in India will be a treasure that I will hold forever.

The 35th ISAAME Forum will be held in **Colombo, Sri Lanka in November 2007** at which time a great Lion from that country, **Mahendra Amarasuriya**, will be our International President.

You don't have to guess where I will be. Register for this upcoming Forum at the end of this year and have a Lionstic experience that will live with you forever!



<<- This simple bowl made from dried leaves with marigold's and a lit candle can carry your dreams and your prayers into eternity.



->>The Hindu funeral pyres along specific parts of the Ganges River in Varanasi. The funeral remains are scattered in the river - or washed away in the annual monsoon flooding.

A SMALL QUOTE TO PONDER UPON ...

“Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either daring adventure, or nothing” - Helen Keller - The Open Door (1957)

We hope that your District newsletter will continue to stimulate your service activities and encourage a flow of interesting information of relevance to Lions throughout District 410B.

Kindly forward any articles and best quality images for publication to DG Rob Fowler at rob@iafrica.com and we'll do our best to get them circulated in future editions.