

REFLECTIONS INDIA: LYNDON'S SEVENTH LETTER FROM INDIA

The time is now 13:30 In Dubai and 11:30am in my beloved Cape Town. I am on flight EK 778 travelling from Dubai direct to Cape Town. I am writing this somewhere over the African skies. I have now been travelling non-stop since 11pm last night 3 February 2017 when I left the Administrative Staff College of India (Asci) in Hyderabad with my Iraqi classmate Seham who was travelling on an earlier flight to Dubai before catching her flight to Baghdad.

Security was tight at the Hyderabad airport last night. It seemed to me that you couldn't enter the airport if you could not show a valid air ticket and if you wanted to get in, then a fee of 100 rupees was made payable. Even after I checked in, I realised that the security checks was being conducted by the Indian army and not police if I have correctly identified their uniforms.

When I landed in Dubai and checked onto the Wifi I was surprised to see photos from my classmates as they were all going to the airport. Our group of classmates had bonded over the last 26 days that we spent in the senior executive management course. The course had thrown together 32 individuals from 21 different countries who were first strangers then classmates and now friends.

Our class was described as a mini United Nations by many a lecturer. And indeed we were. From South America we had Fernan and Marisol who represented Peru. They participated everywhere and were also the only ones to take the plunge and travel to the Taj Mahal. They introduced the wonders of Peru to us and we all now appreciate the good work being done in Peru. From Europe we had Eva who represented Estonia. We learnt from Eva that Estonia has become very e-focussed and have conducted national elections for the last ten years via e- voting and that you can even apply to become an e- citizen of Estonia and set up companies there. From Russia we had Maria and Nikita. Maria is from Khanty Mansiysk which is in Siberia and was quite surprised when I told her that I in fact visited her city a few years ago when I went to the Women's World Chess Championship. Nikita is from a city called Ivanova and he is senior history lecturer and administrator at the university. Maria, Nikita and I often went out sightseeing and shopping together.

From Asia we met Nima who is from Iran and who was a hard working chap. He worked long hours and was always ready to send photos of the group whether they were stuck in a lift at a shopping centre, or when we were on an outing and doing our morning yoga exercises. Sonam is from a small country called Bhutan nestled in the Himalayas which is bordered by China and India. Sonam is a school principal and who was completely dedicated to each task assigned to us. He told us that Bhutan was the first country in the world to have a National Happiness Index in which they check the happiness of the people! I had earlier introduced you to Seham from Iraq and she often reminded us what was important in Arab culture.

From Africa we had representatives from various countries. Elvis and Giselle were from Cameroon. Giselle told us that she was the wife of a king and Elvis regaled us with stories of his travels working for the African Union. Prudence from Uganda was in charge of the Human Resources in the Uganda education system and was never shy to state how she feels on any subject and offer motherly advice. Devota from Tanzania was a gem to have in my group when we were assigned group assignments. I was the group leader and before I knew it, Devota had within 24 hours researched our topic and sent through her research. Devota was very devoted. Tanzania is lucky to have her! Her colleague Samwell always had wise words and could contribute on any subject. Johnson from Kenya works at the University of Nairobi and is a well-spoken articulate academic. Nomsa was from Malawi and spoke eloquently about the challenges facing her country.

Hussein from Sudan was excellent in his role of interpreter when needed and he was also very active when we had exercises (despite that mysterious pillow for his back). Ethiopia was represented by the quartet of Mohammed, Haimonot, Elsebeth and Tewodros. They formed a formidable quartet and were inseparable. They showed us some Ethiopian dancing at our cultural evening.

From the West Coast of Africa we had David and Vivian from Ghana. Both well-spoken individuals they represented Ghana very well and made a strong case for us to visit Ghana. Kebbeh from Liberia was very outspoken and forthright and could hold her own in any debate. Probing questions were her forte! Well done queen of Liberia. From the Northern part of Africa we had Adamou and Youssef who introduced us to the country of Niger (and who made the point that we must not confuse it with Nigeria!). Niger is largely French speaking and is a Muslim country.

From South Asia we had Abdul Almas who was from Afghanistan and who held strong views. He is a computer IT expert and loves dancing. From Bangladesh we had Mohammed who never failed at any moment to tell us about the founding father of the Bangladesh nation. I learnt quite a lot about Bangladesh and the struggle for independence. We had two Sri Lankan representatives Dimesh and Kumidi. I am not sure if Hyderabad still has any saris left because on the last night I was there I spotted Kumidi, Dimesh and Sonam carrying bags laden with saris and Dimesh ruefully told me that he thinks he got Kumidi to spend all her money now because they had more than a dozen saris! Dimesh and I often chatted about the Sri Lankan cricket team currently travelling and playing in South Africa.

Our class also had two local representatives from the Indian Shipping companies which is one of the largest companies in India. Naveen and Captain Rajesh were both from Mumbai and they were very useful in introducing us to the culture and norms when we had difficult questions. Captain Rajesh was the captain of several large vessels and he was an astute negotiator. In the market place we often watched him negotiate on our behalf. He would haggle in the local language and I would watch the distinctive Indian head movement before I made a move for my wallet!

One of the many positive things the course introduced us to was Yoga. At first people were ambivalent but slowly a number of us came to solidly believe in it. I and about five others boast 100 percent attendance records but of course, alas, I must admit the toe to nose and various other embodiments we had to perform still proved difficult but I shall work and persevere! We often found ourselves at 06:30am in the morning doing breathing exercises (with ratio) breathing in five seconds and breathing out in ten seconds! Dr Arif Syed our yoga instructor really knew his stuff and

could painstakingly point out which exercise was good for whatever ailment you or your family member had!

The yoga classes were performed for the last three weeks on the beautiful lawns adorning our classrooms. The gardens in the college were constructed in 1934 and was awarded ten years ago full National Heritage status. The beautiful gardens creates an ambience and promotes good intellectual discussions. Many functions are held on the lawns and the Administrative Staff College of India (Asci) has a proud history. The Asci started its life in 1956 and has become one of India's leading educational institutes.

The course was divided up into four weeks and the course was described by many a speaker as a Mini MBA. Classes were held about a variety of topics which we as graduates of the course will take back to our countries to implement and align to the best and good practices we have taught. The lecturers are all top notch with most boasting PhDs and having years of experience.

One of the outstanding parts of the course for me was the fact that an emphasis was also placed on us to appreciate the history of Hyderabad. From that first Wednesday when we visited the Fort Golconda we became steeped into the history of the city. We went to Ramoji film studio which is the world's biggest film studio where we were shown how movies and television series are made.

The visits to Charminar and Chowmahalla Palace which I have spoken about in my earlier letters were particular highlights for me. These historical sites tell us much about Hyderabad and the earlier life that the city had. We saw how the rulers of the city, the nizams, lived and how they constructed the city to work best. Any visit to Hyderabad must include these two historical sites. The Mecca Mosque on the right of Charminar is also very special.

One evening Rajesh and Naveen took us to a temple and introduced us to various gods and told us about the significance of each. We also visited Lake Hussan Sagar which has the biggest Statue of Buddha in India as the centre piece of the lake. I think the underlying spiritual sense is found throughout the fabric of society and one can see this in the deference people have for one another and also how nothing is too challenging. Even when faced with difficult situations our coordinators professors Swanarlatha and Prof Subashini were able to see the good in the questions and were able to easily steer the conversation.

One of the things that I will forever take with me with is the amount of traffic that inhabits the streets of Hyderabad. I don't like traffic because it steals a great part of our day but in Hyderabad traffic starts from 5am and seems to continue until midnight. On the roads would be cars, buses, motorcycles and Tuk - Tuks. Each of those battles for a share of the roads. The motorcycle guys appear to believe that helmets are an optional luxury as so few wear them. I was always amazed when I saw guys riding two or three on a motorbike and then one of the passengers would be casually updating Facebook or texting whilst in traffic!

One of the things I noticed though was the complete lack of branded materials that said Made in India. It was only in my fourth week that we could find a t- shirt with the words I love India on. The normal market paraphernalia just didn't seem to be around. Perhaps a gap in the market?

I also went searching in the malls for a Hyderabad Sunrisers cricket top but could not find a single

one. I am not sure about branding rights in India but perhaps our marketing lecturer must speak to the manufacturers as we were unable to find a top to purchase to take home!

I have personally taken many lessons from the four weeks I was here. The classes were intellectually demanding and needed full attention. I enjoyed that tremendously. I also discovered that around the world all of us grapple with similar issues whether it be implementation of programme or dealing with difficult people. There were a few nights when the god Bacchus was with us when Elvis, Fernan, Nikita and I tried to resolve the Middle East issues. Alas despite numerous attempts we were not able to come up with solutions and we agreed to reconvene at an appropriate time to again analyse this matter thoroughly with the assistance of Bacchus and other gods who may find favour.

In my earlier letters I spoke about the chess scene in India and by now everyone who knows a little about chess knows that the greatest Indian chess player is Vishy Anand. He became a grandmaster in 1987 and was the world junior champion in that year. He was the world championship five times in all three formats of the game. He hails from the South of India although he nowadays lives in Spain. Anand has brought joy to many chess players with his speed and brilliance. He effortlessly disposes of opponents and his calculation is legendary. He has been the reason why India today has 43 grandmasters and is able to churn out grandmasters each year. Anand has visited South Africa a few years ago and chessbase carried a nice article. He has also spoken about the importance of chess clubs. Google Anand and chess clubs. There is a three part interview series on Chessabase.

One of things that struck me from the first day I arrived there was the swastika. I have always associated the swastika with the Nazi and I only now found that it is an ancient symbol in India!

To the Administrative Staff College of India I thank you for the opportunity you have provided to us from around the world. We have learnt many valuable lessons and we are proud to be part of the Ascii family.

Regards

Dr Lyndon Bouah