

## Incredible India

*by Keith Wohlfert, Group 12 Fellow*

**D**uring 17 days in mid-January 2008, a group of about 50 Wisconsinites traveled to India through their association with the Wisconsin Rural Leadership Program. Each participant was encouraged to keep a personal journal of their experience in India. It is from my daily journal entries, along with a collection of random thoughts that these observations are drawn. Brief as they are, I hope they provide insights to the Indian culture and to the group's experiences during their visit.

!ncredible !ndia (complete with the exclamation points for special emphasis) was seen on a tour bus in Chennai. It's a creative and descriptive statement.

In orientation class we were told to expect extreme contrasts everywhere in India. First impression: there are extreme contrasts everywhere in India!

This morning, in a single image through a bus window I saw a tractor, a truck, a pedal-powered rickshaw, people walking, a cart pulled by oxen and a wagon of fodder pulled by a single camel. Where's my camera?

These are gracious and gentle people; they play well together.

Street traffic here is a remarkable thing to behold. It's synchronized chaos. To use an obscure aviation term, Indian traffic is an endless series of octaflugerions – any odd or aimless maneuver.

I see no need for Americans to be jealous of India's recent economic progress. Let's swallow some of our pride and let loose of the idea that we're positioned at the center of the Universe.

This is indeed a very dirty country in need of a good sweeping...then let's pressure wash it for good measure! Adopt-A-Highway! Rats are universally nasty creatures anytime and anywhere.

Blindness is considered to be a fatal condition in India. Yet, one of our small groups visited an eye clinic sponsored by Lions Club International which is doing remarkable things. I'm a longtime Lion with a new perspective on the organization's international efforts in vision-related programs.

**I**n most places, gas sells for 45 rupees per liter...that converts to about \$4.20 per gallon.

As applied to electric service, reliability is a relative term in India. In high tech neighborhoods, pad-mounted standby generator sets are standard equipment.

A dog is a dog is a dog. They may come in a few different colors but in India they're mostly all the same critter.

Hot water has proven to be an elusive commodity . I have heard rumors of random appearances among group members but I can not personally confirm its presence.

Coal is king in India. Among their vast infrastructural needs, it's hard to imagine this country being overly concerned about coal-induced global warming issues any time soon.

In India, lane markers, one-way signs, stop signs, and traffic lights are suggestions at best.

Watching traffic from the front seat of an Indian tour bus is not unlike living life in a video game.

With that said, I can not recall witnessing a single vehicle accident and it's rare to see a dented vehicle on the road.

The TATA Corporation recently introduced the Nano. This car will sell for the equivalent of \$2,800 and promises to put automobile ownership within reach of the growing Indian middle class.

The United States once had slavery; India *unofficially* still has the caste system.

**“India! It is a land of dichotomies: a culture of the rich and very poor, of elaborate architecture and filth, of high castles and low castes, or centuries of tradition and modern influence, a land with respect for life, but varied quality of life.”**

*The opening paragraph from a multi-page narrative written by a friend of WRLP Group XII member Jane Hansen, highlighting her visit to India.*