

**Experience Review – Aspen Institute India**

Growing up as a “Third Culture Kid” and recently graduating with an Honours degree in politics and economics, I am fascinated by the geostrategic realities driving bilateral relationships in Asia. Being an Avantha International Fellow with the Aspen Institute India for two months starting in October 2013 was the perfect opportunity to engage in dialogue with subject matter experts and respected internationally-renowned commentators. These dialogues allowed me to build a deeper understanding of the opportunities, challenges and priorities that are shaping current Indian Government policy in the domestic and international arenas.

My two-month fellowship occurred during a pivotal period shaping Indian democracy, economics, and foreign relations. As a student of politics and economics, I found myself a front row observer to a fascinating political drama involving a cast of colourful characters engaged in determining the current and future state of the Indian economy.

During my stay, the national stage was set by the following circumstances; the publicly polarizing Narendra Modi had recently been named the prime ministerial candidate for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in anticipation of spring 2014 elections, and state elections were being held that dramatically reshaped the political disposition of the country. The Indian economy was beginning to show signs of recovery following a dramatic slowdown earlier in the year (though inflation and the rupee were still performing disappointingly), and dialogue on foreign relations with China became more active as a result of border negotiations and developments in the South and East China Sea. Over the course of the fellowship, I was privileged to attend local fascinating Aspen-organized events in which influential and distinguished panelists discussed these topics and postulated their consequences.

From the start of the fellowship, I was actively engaged in a diverse range of enriching tasks. For example, I was asked to develop a basic understanding of Indian foreign policy and priorities and I was involved in preparing and distributing a foreign policy survey to Indian thought-leaders in partnership with the Political Science Department of Indiana University. By having access to the survey results, I got a glimpse into the views of Indian business, NGO and government leaders on India's foreign policy priorities and challenges. Unfortunately, my fellowship concluded before the necessary amount of data had been collected, but I look forward to viewing the published product and further cooperative scholarly publications that may come to fruition because of this cross-border and cross-institutional bond.

Along with this task, I was also given the opportunity to become involved with Aspen India's Track-II Dialogues, a primary initiative of the institute and one that distinguishes it from other foreign policy think tanks in India. My involvement with the Sixth India-Israel Forum was multi-faceted, as I was involved with the program's development, production and follow up. In the lead up to the event and during travel with the delegation over the course of the Forum in the vibrant cities of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, I learned about the innovative ecosystem of Israel, the bilateral trade opportunities present and witnessed diplomacy at work between stakeholders of two dynamic democracies. Our delegation was also given a sitting with President Shimon Peres and treated to his words of wisdom that will be a lifelong memory.

My fellowship work also led me to the fast-paced and culturally abundant city of Mumbai where I participated in the Seventh India Trilateral Forum, comprised of delegates from the United States, European Union and India. The event, a joint initiative over the past years between the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Sweden and Aspen Institute India. My role was to prepare an executive summary of the event for distribution amongst Aspen India's subscribers. The forum was centered on trilateral

strategic dialogues ranging from discourse on China to pending free trade agreements. The delegation comprised influential academics, business executives and government officials from the three polities that specialize in South and East Asian policy. With my academic and professional interests positioned in this region, the panel discussions and informal conversations that transpired over the course of the forum were valuable towards my professional and scholarly growth.

### **Events Attended**

Another staple of Aspen's program is the regular weekly events held within New Delhi that address topics in a range of different fields, whether domestically or internationally focused. The first local event I attended was a memorable discussion between Aspen Institute India Chairman Mr. Gautam Thapar and Mr. Shivshankar Menon, India's National Security Advisor on the current state of US-India relations. The discussion between these two individuals is a sample of the heavy hitters that Aspen India gathers to debate critical issues influencing India's priorities. Other memorable events attended during my fellowship include an enlightening discussion on Indian business in the 21<sup>st</sup> century between former Chief Mentor of the Confederation of Indian Industry Mr. Tarun Das and Chairman of Bajaj Group Mr. Rahul Bajaj; a discussion between Johns Hopkins professor James Mann and Ambassador Shyam Saran on Indian interests in China as a global power; and a fascinating discussion on the evolution of Bhutanese democracy held by His Excellency Sonam Kinga and Indian parliamentarian Mr. Baijayant Panda.

During these events, I documented the proceedings and interacted with event attendees, gaining valuable domestic perspectives into current events. The participants were always keen to share their views with a visiting international fellow, and were particularly interested to hear my perspectives on domestic and global events.

## **Insights Gained**

Day-to-day activities in the Aspen office were never repetitious. The fellowship has been designed for foreign scholars to explore any particular area of interest with a wealth of resources at their disposal. Independent research was encouraged to be undertaken in multiple sectors, and it was easy to become involved in one of the many different projects in the Aspen India pipeline. Through my professional exposure in the office and exposure to the vibrant Delhi ecosystem, I gained valuable insights that I believe can only be gained whilst living in India.

### *a) Intranational Diversity and its Consequences*

In public school, we are taught to see a country as a single entity for the sake of simplicity and to cover a large global landscape within a defined period, usually a semester. By definition, a nation is a united citizenry residing within a designated area of land that shares a cultural heritage, beliefs and language. To frame India as a nation would be a grave misconception. In a country that holds more than 30 times the population of Canada, people from different parts of the country share few similarities beyond the name on the front of their passports, and their sense of national pride. The term “land of plenty” is as applicable to cultural diversity as it is to the wildlife, vegetation and spices that can be found in the Indian subcontinent. While this leads the country to be rich in culture, it has certain drawbacks in essential civic processes.

Having now lived and travelled within India for 4 months, I have come to understand just how significant these interstate differences are to the country’s democracy. Much of the infamous political dysfunction can be better understood once one comprehends the challenge the country’s diverse demography places on its democratic processes. As India becomes more prominent on the

international stage, it will be important for those countries interested in strengthening their bilateral and multilateral relationships to understand how diversity impacts the political, economic and social fabric of Indian society.

*b) Masked Order*

Building upon the point made above, what may be perceived as dysfunctional is often accompanied by a hidden system of order. Delhi traffic is an appropriate analogy: underneath the superficial appearance of chaos lies a tolerated order that allows movement towards a destination. The system is slow and tedious, relying on last-second critical decisions leaving foreigners dumbfounded and locals frustrated. However, though the public is continuously disappointed by traffic and political structures alike, India works; there is a sense of forward movement and there's hope the future will bring change.

**Final considerations**

Reflecting on my experience, the Avantha International Fellowship provided an unparalleled opportunity to interact with individuals shaping India's foreign policy. This is in large part due to the strong network that Aspen India has developed over the past years, and the organization's reputation amongst Indian thought leaders. Not only did I benefit from the interaction with key opinion leaders but I was also provided the resources necessary to explore other subjects of interest on India.

My fellowship experience would not have been as enjoyable if it had not been for the warm, spirited and enthusiastic staff of Aspen Institute India. There was never a dull moment within the walls of Aspen, as the upbeat staff produced fresh and innovative programs in a fun and vibrant team setting. Having a creative and engaging work environment is at the core of the organization's success, and this environment would not be possible without the guidance of the

management staff. On this note, I would like to extend a special thanks to Ms. Kiran Pasricha and Mr. Wikky Katyal for inspiring me over the course of the two-month fellowship and playing a tremendous role in my professional growth.

In summation, the Avantha International Fellowship provided a base on which to launch my introduction to the incredibly vibrant and dynamic culture of India. The experience was truly unique and the lessons learned during my time with Aspen will continue to influence my professional and personal growth in the coming years.